

Dear Runaway

a novel in letters

Thanks to:

Cassie. Because most people have to live with the fact that their partners had other loves. But most people don't have to deal with the existence of a whole book about it.

Ian. Because you're my bro, bro.

Jen. Because you're so supportive.

There were a lot of readers who helped me edit this at different stages. They include: Erin K., Leo, Jess, Nicanor, Katie, Amy, Julia, Ian, Megan, Kristen, Michelle, Nikki, Heather C., Kristina, Jordyn, Rachel, Kirsten, Elle...

My Dangerous Family. Kirsten, Elle, Rob, Leo, Michelle, Niyati, "Hedley," Erin, and I know there's someone I'm forgetting. Maybe a couple people.

Kevin: for Throat Glass.

Sage: Saint Sage.

Tom: You were always so generous with your time and attention, and I learned everything from you. Everything good, that is.

Mom.

Everyone else, I'll say it to you in real life.

Dear Kindergarten Crush,

You were the first person I loved. Loved in whatever form that happens when you're four years old.

But you know how it is. People change. Their moms stop hanging out. People get forced apart.

I guess this is my apology. And confession. I've been seeing other people even though we never officially broke up.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mediator,

I was a little kid when my parents split, and I asked my mom why. Her answer wasn't complicated.

We just didn't love each other anymore, she said.

I think a lot about asking my mom again. Now that I'm older. I'm sure there's more to it than they were in love and then they weren't in love. I'm sure something happened, or something was happening for a long time and finally they did something about it.

I never asked, though. I don't know if my mom wants to talk about it. I don't think I would want to talk about it. I hope she doesn't think I never ask because I don't care how she feels.

If I asked though, I'd be hoping to figure what went wrong with them. That it would be one more thing I could avoid. Maybe divorce isn't something you can avoid all the way. But maybe you can make sure and not have the same divorce your parents did.

Best,
Pete

Dear Named,

Do you ever think about how you would name a baby?

A really great author said one time that he got all his character names from graveyards because, when it came to names, people used to really go for it. They don't try as hard now. You don't get great names like Raymond Thornton Chandler or Raymond Cleve Carver.

It's not just about Raymond names. Those were just the only two I could get from off the top of my head.

It would be good to go for it. Naming a baby. It would be good to start him with that much at least.

Best,
Pete

Dear Runaway,

Once, when I was a kid, I said I was going to run away from home. I was mad about something. I don't remember what it was, but it made me mad enough that I decided the best thing would be a fresh start.

The idea was to leave home all the way.

I got to the far edge of the front porch, which seemed far enough to sit down and read Spider-Man comics.

The worst moment for a kid has to be after you declare you're running away, then go back inside and have to make an excuse about why you came back.

Best,
Pete

Dear Scribbler,

Girls used to do this thing in school. If Katie Lucas liked Geoff Sanchez, she'd write her name in a notebook like they were married. Katie Sanchez.

All sorts of combinations. Cody Beepen as Cody Clark. Christine Hilker as Christine Ragsdale. Christine Hilker was a 5th grader who was good at soccer and bad at conjugating verbs. Christine Ragsdale could be grown up and married to Hank Ragsdale, who she loved because he never asked her to do verb conjugation worksheets. Christine Ragsdale had a house with a special fence so the dogs could run between the front yard and the backyard all day.

My name's kind of funny. Blunt. Short. Maybe I would have been better at girlfriends when I was little if my name was cool.

Best,
Pete

Dear Catcher,

As a boy I was obsessed with the idea of parachutes. That you could jump from something and a bed sheet could slow your fall.

The way it was with those little parachute men, the ones inside a plastic egg for 25-cents. The way they would sink to the ground, wobbling at the end of kite string.

I tried everything I could think of. Grocery sacks. Black plastic garbage bags. A sleeping bag. A sweatshirt with the neck and arm holes tied off.

Every time, I jumped from the swing set, my hands gripped around the handles of some material never designed for such a thing. That's how sure I was. I didn't walk off the side. I jumped. There was one upwards moment where this one might work.

And every time I hit the ground hard. That push of blood from the bottoms of my feet like it might all burst through the tops.

I can remember once falling hard enough that my jaw snapped closed when I hit the ground. My teeth slapped together, so loud it was the sound of firing a pistol inside my head.

Other men have told me that they did the same thing as boys. The materials they used are different here and there, and the places they jumped from. A patio, a barn, a tall fence, a tree fort.

The parts that are always the same are the part where the boy can't stop thinking about it and the part where it never works. All those hours of boy work, not a decent parachute in the bunch. Lots of furious moms, lots of broken this and that. Not a lot of gentle floating down to the ground, though.

You can't really know if your folded blue tarp is any good until you're in the air, hanging onto it like you might be the first boy to slow a fall, like your arms might snap up and hold in a piece of the air. Like you might have found something folded in your own linen closet that could save you just a little bit.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleepover Arranger,

I stayed the night at another kid's house one time, and it was weird. They ate the same things, but different. Their tacos tasted different even though they were tacos. We ate tacos at home all the time, but not like this. Their sodas in their plastic cups tasted different.

We laid out sleeping bags to sleep on the floor, but in the middle of the night my friend went and slept in his bed so I was the only one sleeping on the floor.

His dad got up and came downstairs to get a drink of water. He stood at the sink and he didn't have a shirt on. He had this huge birthmark thing on his back. It was big and brown and it looked like someone slapped a hamburger on his back. It was there in the light from over the sink.

He was one of those scary dads you never saw. The only times you did see him it was because he had to yell at someone. I pretended to be still asleep because I didn't want to talk to him when he didn't have all of his clothes on, while the brown hamburger thing watched from over his shoulder.

Do other kids pretend to be asleep a lot? It always seems like kids are asleep, but I was never asleep. I was just pretending. It was kind of like being safe even when you weren't safe. When your stomach was sad from weird tacos and you were alone on someone else's floor.

Best,
Pete

Dear Click-It,

On Fridays my dad would buy a case of beer and drink almost the whole thing. He'd pass out in front of the TV, his head tilted back and his mouth open wide while he slept.

He would snore when he was like that. Me and my brothers, we'd laugh.

Then, sometimes our dad would wake himself up with a big snore and look confused at the TV.

He'd say, I'm not long for this world.

That was how he said he was tired. Ready for bed.

I'm not long for this world.

Sometimes he was really not long for this world, and those times he would get up and slumb down the hall to his bed. He'd leave us there watching the TV, and that's usually when I figured out we were watching one of his shows about science fiction stuff.

I didn't know what it meant to be long for the world. Or what our dad meant by it. If it was just something he said because it was more fun than saying, I'm tired. Or if, you know. If he didn't think he'd be around all that long. I didn't understand long for this world.

What I understood was what it meant to maybe want someone to stick around a little longer. One more commercial at least.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ansel,

My mom got her master's degree when I was a little kid.

We were in the backyard, so my grandma could take a picture with me and my brother and my mom. My mom had on her graduation stuff. Me and my brother made faces and did the rabbit ears on each other with our fingers every time my grandma pushed the button on the camera.

Me and my brother did it so many times. We made rabbit ears and hooked our fingers in our lips and stretched out our mouths. We messed up the picture so many times my mom cried.

It's still hard to take a picture without a goofy face. I don't know how to smile and stand next to someone like something good is happening, and I don't know how to kiss someone on the cheek like it was my idea and it wasn't just something to do for a picture. When someone takes a picture, I get nervous.

Best,
Pete

Dear Contracted,

Pressing your lips on someone's lips, I just didn't get it when I was a kid. What would feel good about something like that.

I told my mom that I didn't think I would ever kiss a girl. I told her because my mom was the only person I talked to about stuff when I was a kid.

She thought it was really funny because she knew a lot more than I did.

So I wrote on a piece of paper that I would never kiss a girl ever for the rest of my life, and then I signed it and then I gave it to my mom. Like a contract. That's how sure I was that I was right.

This is what happens when your parents divorce and remarry a lot of times. A contract is something you understand and a kiss is something you don't.

It turned out I was very wrong about that particular contract. I was really wrong.

When I signed that contract, my mom said that she would get that contract out when I had a girlfriend, and then we would all laugh about it.

She never did, though. Even when I had a girlfriend, and then a different girlfriend. She kept it a secret that I was so dumb.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jane Hancock,

I decided to try and kiss you when you were the only girl who signed my cast.

Best,
Pete

Dear Clownner,

Have you heard the one about Divorced Barbie?

My dad was one of those dads who told jokes all the time. Not good jokes. Dad jokes. Ones where a cow does something a cow doesn't usually do, or a nonsense word is put to use, or sometimes a very safe word is used in a cute way to replace a word like penis.

He told the Divorced Barbie one a lot. It starts in that classic joke way, Did you hear the one about Divorced Barbie?

That's a really bad setup for a joke. What if someone says Yes? And just because someone says No doesn't mean the same thing as, No I haven't, but I'd like to hear it.

My dad's jokes were bad, but the divorced Barbie one was really bad. It pretty much ends up where the joke is that Ken and Barbie get a divorce and Barbie takes all of Ken's things.

You're supposed to say the ending in a cute way, but I don't really feel like doing that right now.

It's okay. I mean, there are things that hurt and you have to laugh about them. Maybe my dad thought that joke was really funny. Maybe it did cheer him up to tell it so much. Maybe it was like a song that gets stuck in your head, so when he thought it was a good time for a joke, that's the one he had ready on his tongue.

I don't know. He probably should have stuck with the one that ended in cute wordplay about artichokes.

Best,
Pete

Dear 1-800-SEXYGIRLS,

I must have called you and hung up about a hundred times when I was a kid.

Another kid showed me, and every time after that, if there was a payphone somewhere, I would tap in the number and wait.

A woman breathes out slow on the other end. Her voice drips out after the breath. She says Hi. Then she starts talking about sexy girls.

Most of the time I wasn't brave enough to wait until the voice started talking. The breath, then I'd hang up and run away from the payphone.

I didn't really know why people were calling. A pretty woman on the phone, but you couldn't see her or touch her or do anything like that. Just hear. It seemed like talking was the least important thing for me and sexy girls to do together.

I was kind of a dummy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cyclist,

My dad bought a tandem bike to ride with his second wife. They didn't do much stuff like ride bikes together. She played tennis sometimes and he kind of did whatever. They only rode it once, only to the end of the block. At the end of the block there was a stop sign, and at the stop sign my dad leaned left to put his left foot on the ground and his wife leaned right to put her right foot on the ground. They wobbled and then crashed over.

They were both pissed off about it, and they never rode that bike again. They couldn't agree on a side to lean when they stopped.

I know that sounds like a really boring metaphor or something, but it really happened.

I didn't get it then, how arguing over which way to lean a tandem bike isn't a fight about how to lean a tandem bike.

Best,
Pete

Dear Alive and Kicking,

When I was a kid we went on a field trip to a hospital where they showed us real skulls and a real lung and a real person's brain.

The brain was grey. I thought it was supposed to be pink, like a pencil eraser, but it was a really boring gray color. It didn't look like anything ever happened in there.

We put on gloves, and they let us touch it.

It was weird to touch it. Because you would think about how this used to be in a guy who was a kid who was probably like me sometimes, and now there's just this brain part of him still left and little kids are all looking at it and poking it.

There's probably lots of important stuff people do with dead brains and dead lungs and things like that. But I don't like how they just showed them to us so we could see them. I'd hate it if I died and my brain died with all its important stuff about how brownies taste and what it's like to take long showers at my apartment. I'd hate it if my dead brain used to do all that good stuff and then kids just poked it and said eww.

Best,
Pete

Dear Educator,

Something to know about me is that I hated school. Really hated it.

In first grade, our teacher would make us write all the numbers to 100, and I could never do it right. I sat next to a kid who was dumber than me though, and he was writing 100, 200, 300... and I was thinking, He's screwed when he gets to 900.

I had a yellow sweatsuit that said Can't Touch This on it. I thought it was so cool. One day I was walking to the gym in my Can't Touch This sweatsuit, and a teacher ran up and started patting me on the head and the back and the stomach, and I was scared and didn't know what she was doing. It was because I was wearing the Can't Touch This clothes and she thought it was funny, but I was really scared.

I thought of ways to get out of school. I opened a can of vegetable beef soup and poured it in the toilet because I thought it might look like I threw up and I could stay home. When I poured it in the toilet, it kind of looked like throwup, but mostly it looked like vegetable beef soup in the toilet.

In second grade the teacher had stitches, and she showed them to us and I felt sick. Another time, they brought all the classes into this big circle to show us what a cow's heart looked like. My teacher was the one who chopped it up. She had this big knife and she was pulling all this stuff out and they were telling us what it did. Kids could leave if they wanted to, and most of the kids left, but I stayed. I wanted to see what was inside it.

In second grade, I almost failed because every Monday I would pretend that my stomach hurt, and my grandma would let me stay home. When the school sent home a note that I might fail second grade, my mom bought a thermometer. She said if my temperature wasn't more than 99 degrees, I had to go to school.

In third grade my teacher had a geographic tongue. I didn't know that word then. It looked like her tongue had a bunch of cracks in it, and that maybe there was only a little skin holding it together and it might fall apart. She would lick her fingers every time she turned a page, and we would see her cracked tongue. We watched a video about bodies, and a guy held his breath for more than a whole minute. I thought that was a really long time, and I thought that if I practiced I could hold my breath that long too. Every day I'd hold my breath when I was supposed to learn about pilgrims.

I was scared after third grade that I was stupid. That fourth grade would be when school really started and I wouldn't be able to do the math or the reading anymore.

In fourth grade, I had a male teacher. He made us do speed math, and then you had to put your name on the board when you were done. He would divide the chalkboard into columns, and the first column was for less than a minute, then the next one was for a little more time, and the next one a little more. I was always in one of the last columns because I wasn't fast at math. I'd have to go up there and write my name, and almost everyone saw me write my name because they were already done and there wasn't much to do but watch people write their names where they belonged. I tried to write mine small. When I sat down, I'd look at my name. I was slow at math, and my handwriting wasn't very nice either.

In fifth grade I had a really nice teacher. She brought in a piece of a meteor that fell on her farm, and she let us touch it. Sometimes when we sat in a circle she would take her shoes off, and she said it was okay if we took ours off too. Sometimes, instead of doing regular math she

had a friend who would come in and teach us how to do origami. I still remember how to make a cup out of a piece of paper, and water really stays inside. She even let us bring snacks because we had the latest lunch in the whole school.

Things were a little less scary after that year. It was okay to go to school. We had to do math, but we didn't have to do it fast. And if you weren't good at fast math, maybe you'd be good at folding things and thinking how paper works. Maybe it was okay for someone to still read out loud to us even if it was something we could read ourselves.

All I really needed was a good teacher to tell me things. We didn't have to be scared and then use being scared to get better. We didn't have to be hungry every day.

I know those sound like stupid things. Like things that a person should know. But I didn't know that. I don't always know that stuff. Sometimes I need a teacher.

Best,
Peter

Dear Darkness My Old Friend,

When I was little I went on a trip to Carlsbad Caverns. At one part they turn off the light in there so you can see how dark it is. I always thought that there was pretty much dark and light, but this kind of dark was different. It felt darker than anything, even if you got in a dark closet in a dark room and put blankets over your head.

One time I had to rewind some film in a really old camera for a class project, so I had to make a dark room at home. I locked myself in the bathroom and put tape over the cracks in the door, then got in the bath tub and pulled the curtain and got under a blanket. It worked okay and the pictures turned out, but even that wasn't as dark as that Carlsbad Caverns with the lights off.

I think there's a difference between when you make it dark and when the dark is just there, all by itself.

Best,
Pete

Dear Grown,

Driver's Ed was hard because I was still short. I couldn't make the seat close enough to the steering wheel. The driving instructor said things about it, but that didn't matter. My driver's ed partner said things about it, but that didn't matter. Then my mom said something about it. In the car, me with the wheel in my small hands. She asked me if I should go to the doctor and make sure my body could grow right.

They teach you to drive stick and to drive in the mountains and at night. They don't cover what to do when you cry behind the wheel. They should. I figured it out that time with my mom, but they should teach you. Everyone does it. Everyone.

Best,
Pete

Dear Explicit,

My dad told me about a new woman he was seeing. He didn't say much about her. He said he was taking it slow, which was fine. He said they went to a party and he brought sleeping bags so they didn't have to drive home. That was fine. He said they didn't have sex, but he said they were sticking to heavy petting. That was not fine.

I didn't really know what heavy petting was. I still don't. I did know the most important thing about it, though, which was that it was something I didn't want to talk about with my dad.

Best,
Pete

Dear Finish Line,

This great coach I had made us run a practice race after school. He took us out to the start, down some country roads, and then he told us we would finish by the flag pole out in front of the school.

What happened, though, is when we got to the finish he told us about, he was there, and he yelled that the real finish line was still another 100 meters or so away. Around a corner and then past the gym.

A lot of people stopped running where the coach said we'd stop in the first place. Where the first finish line was. They walked, or they left.

I didn't stop.

I beat a lot of people that day for the first time. I mean, sort of. The rules changed before the end, so they were beating me up until then. By a lot.

I think something people like about sports is that there are rules. About how long it can take and about what you can and can't do. You would never see something like that in regular sports, someone decide at the last minute that all 3-pointers should be worth 8, or that a 100-meter dash would now be 125 meters long.

The stupid thing is that all the rules are made up anyway. When our coach made us run further, he showed us that. A 3-pointer is worth 3 points, but we could just decide it isn't.

Everything's kind of like that. There are a lot of rules.

You get married to someone and you're supposed to stay married.

Nothing too bad happens to you or anyone you care about.

Ants live outside and don't invade the kitchen.

None of the rules are really rules. They're just things we decided.

When that happens, when someone moves the finish line, you can stop and say that you're not a trained chimp and leave and be mad about it. Or you can keep running. Fuck it. The old rules are just as made up as the new ones.

Best,
Pete

Dear Trap,

My dad had three marriages and only wore a wedding ring for the third one. And even that one he didn't wear most of the time.

He took that ring off at night. He took it off if he was doing anything, even if he didn't really need his hands. He would forget to wear it all the time, and his third wife would remind him, and he would stop what he was doing to go upstairs and get it from the little dish in the bathroom, a dish his third wife got because he took off his ring so much. He needed a special place for when it wasn't on his hand.

My dad never wore much jewelry. No other rings or anything like that. He said it wasn't comfortable.

It's probably not about doing things the comfortable way, the way that you're used to.

Best,
Pete

Dear Apple,

My dad used to spend a lot of time in his office. He'd write long letters on yellow legal pads. He would write and write and then he would lean back in his chair. Sometimes he would talk out loud. Not like he was dictating the letter to himself, more like he was reading the letter back to make sure it felt the way he wanted it to feel.

Mostly he threw away the letters when he was done. He ripped them up too because he didn't want us to go through his stuff and read them.

It must have made him feel better to write all that stuff, but he probably should have sent some of it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Discreet,

Thanks for not telling anyone that I had a boner all the times we danced at the prom. I'm sorry that happened. Like three times. I didn't know how to stop it. I didn't mean to gross you out.

If you didn't even know and you're grossed out right now, then I'm sorry for that instead.

Best,
Pete

Dear Giving Tree,

My mom came with me so I could camp out and get concert tickets when I was a kid. It was kind of lame to be there with my mom. I wanted to be like the cool older kids who were sitting in circles in line. How they laughed and sat close. But my mom was okay to sit with.

I fell asleep that night. I don't know when. It was late, and it was one of those things where I thought I would never sleep, and then I did and when I woke up it was the morning.

My mom didn't sleep at all. She looked really bad and really old. For a minute there I thought sure she was going to cry.

We got the tickets and went home.

I don't remember the concert too much. I don't remember the songs they played. I don't even listen to that band anymore. But I remember what my mom looked like that morning.

The more old I get the more sad I get that I made my mom sleep on a sidewalk.

Best,
Pete

Dear Horseshoe,

One time my dad opened his mouth and tilted his head back to show me how crooked his jaw was. On the top, how it's normally all the teeth lined up like a horseshoe, his was like that, except toward the back the horseshoe was bent with a little jag in it.

It was one of those things that looked so wrong from how it was supposed to look that you wondered if it hurt, just it being like that.

A lot of times I think people have stuff like that, stuff about them we don't know until they show us, and then when they do you feel sort of bad. But they feel bad all the time.

Best,
Pete

Dear High School Girlfriend,

It's really weird how your mom wouldn't let you buy red or black underwear in high school. How she called red and black Adult Colors.

It was pretty weird that I had silk leopard print boxer shorts at the same time.

We did not know how to manage underwear.

Our parents weren't much help.

Best,

Pete

Dear Maintainer,

Something was different about you in that picture on the mantle at your parents' house. The one where you're in the mountains and it's fall. The aspen all have their gold coin leaves out. You in a red sweater.

I kept looking to figure out what was different about you. It was your eyebrows. You didn't pluck your eyebrows when that picture happened. They weren't huge, not weird like mine, but they were bigger.

If I had a daughter, it would scare me when she started plucking her eyebrows.

Best,
Pete

Dear Inviting,

Sneaking into your room at night, that was scary as hell. People don't always believe me when I say that I had to walk through this whole room of your stepdad's guns and hunting trophies to get to your bedroom. Guns and guns and guns. A moose head stuck to the wall, his fake, open eyes. It sounds made-up. It's so scary that it doesn't even sound real.

Then we would be naked and I wouldn't be thinking about that stuff even though it was scary and right outside the door. But then we wouldn't be naked anymore and it was all I could think about. The guns and guns and the fake moose eyes.

The part that scares me when I think about it now isn't your step dad. Or his guns or his animal heads.

The part that scares me, I don't think I wanted to sneak in. It wasn't worth it to sneak in past all that and see you.

The part that scares me, I only did it because I was scared not to. Scared someone else would.

Best,
Pete

Dear Back of My Mind,

My friend's dad was a cop, and he would tell us some of his horrible cop stories sometimes.

I don't know if most cops are good or bad people, but I do know they are bad deciders about which stories to tell kids.

He told us one story about a lady who ate rat poison to kill herself, and then drank cough medicine so she would fall asleep and it wouldn't hurt. Then she woke up later and she still wasn't dead, so she called the hospital.

Something about the way the medicine and the rat poison mixed made it so she was going to die, but really slow. That's what the hospital told her. That's what they said before they said there wasn't anything they could do.

I think about her all the time. The Rat Poison Lady. It was this story a guy told me, and now I think about it all the time.

Some of these stories, they're kind of awful. I hope you don't think about them too much. That's not why I wrote them down.

Best,
Pete

Dear Experimenter,

I used to have this friend. We liked a lot of the same stuff, and living in a boring little town there wasn't much to do but walk around and talk about comics and fireworks and school.

When we got older, we still walked around. We didn't talk fireworks anymore. We still talked about comics and school. And now blowjobs and handjobs. How this one girl from school who always wore lipstick and then a dark line around the lipstick, how over the summer she blew this guy and threw up on the guy's dick. How a blowjob works when you do it on a girl. What people maybe did after they came to get rid of the cum. We laughed.

My friend was always going to this party or that party and saying how maybe this girl or that girl might maybe give him a handjob if there was a patio out back or something.

I wasn't really in this world of blowjobs and drinking parties and drinking at campsites. I'd never tasted beer. I still liked fireworks.

Good thing because my first blowjob was still years and years down the road. And that one was the kind where no one knows what to do and you're almost happy it's over. The kind where you pull your clothes on right after because even though you got a blowjob, you're not ready to be naked with someone else.

Walking around talking about blowjobs with my friend was a lot more laughs than getting blowjobs. Maybe I'm not good at getting blowjobs.

Best,
Pete

Dear Gummi,

When I worked at the pizza place, the manager packed his own lunches. Most of us who worked there, we ate pizzas we messed up and couldn't deliver.

Pizzas always got messed up when we were hungry. The pepperoni and extra cheese kind of messed up. Funny how that worked out.

The manager didn't stop us, but he ate his bag lunch instead of our pizza messes.

He was older. Really small, and he wore thick glasses. His lunches were stuffed into a purple cooler bag with a really short strap, like a purse if purses came in cube shape.

He would eat sitting on the back steps where people went to smoke around a plastic bucket with sand shoveled in. No one went to smoke when he was eating his lunch out there, even if he was out there for an hour and someone wanted a cigarette bad.

A couple times I saw he had those package things with tiny crackers and sliced cheese and little ham discs. He was sitting in the white plastic patio chair, the tray of food with little pockets for the different food balanced on his legs while he made baby sandwiches with crackers and ham discs.

Another time he had the kind of yogurt that comes in a tube and you squeeze it in your mouth.

His lunches weren't the exact same all the time, but they made me feel the same way all the time.

He brought pouches of fruit snacks a lot, kinds like gummi sharks. He would eat those really fast, one at a time, but it only took him a minute to eat the whole pouch. I don't have much of a sweet tooth anymore, but I feel like most people want to stretch out candy a little because it's candy and you can enjoy candy.

Watching the manager eat those gummis, how he looked at every gummi to see its color before stuffing it in his mouth, that was the hardest thing about working at the pizza place.

Best,
Pete

Dear Knick-Knack,

Growing up we had these old neighbors. Retired couple. The old man spent all his time in the garage making little doo-dads to put up around the house. Birdhouses, intricate mailboxes, stuff like that. The husband carved their names, Fred and Irma, in wooden letters that he nailed above the garage.

They even had a roll of paper and a golf pencil in this tiny cabinet nailed up near the front door so you could leave them a message when they weren't home. They were always home.

The man got old first. He would slouch around and pick up the yard, but he couldn't get up the ladder anymore. As soon as that happened, his wife, who could still do stuff like ladders, climbed up and took down all the doo-dads. The bird houses, the letters on the garage. Their house looked more normal with all the decorations gone and the old man just sitting on the porch.

I started mowing their lawn when Fred was too weak to lift the grass bags himself. He would walk across the street at seven or eight in the morning, and his shoes scraped the road because he couldn't pick up his feet high enough. When he got to our house he always asked my mom the same question: Is that boy coming to mow my lawn?

Mostly I mowed on Sunday while his wife was at church. He didn't go to church with her at all, ever. One time Fred told me, I don't know why she goes to church. I keep telling her she's going to hell no matter what.

Irma had a stroke in their last couple years together, down in their basement. Somehow, and I have no fucking idea how, Fred picked her up, carried her out of the basement, and took her to the hospital.

Irma slowed down from her stroke. Fred died first, but Irma didn't dawdle too far behind.

I've seen happy couples. I've seen unhappy couples. I've seen outright hostile couples who separate and everyone is better off. But what I don't see so much of anymore are those couples who seem mad and like they hate each other, but must have some kind of something. Enough to carry each other up the stairs, at least.

Maybe Irma was light. She was thin. But I can't believe she was much lighter than the bags of grass Fred couldn't lift alone.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pious,

One time I went camping really high in the mountains. There was snow up there even though it was July.

The first night was cold, but we dressed in all the clothes we carried up and sat out to look at stars. It wasn't like the normal kind of looking at stars. You could see all the stars and then more stars behind those stars. You could see brushstrokes of light where other galaxies are.

You can see so far if it's dark enough. People used to see like this all the time. We made too many lights so we could see stuff that's close, but now we can't see the far away stuff anymore.

It was so dark when we camped that you could see satellites. My friend showed me one. It looked just like a star, but it moved across the sky really fast. Once you saw one, you could see more. They were everywhere.

I couldn't tell if I liked it better seeing the stars or the satellites. I like nature, but this looked almost just like nature. We put a machine all the way where the stars are. That's pretty great too.

Those satellites made me feel really good because something beautiful happened. And we did that. So I guess thinking somebody did all the stars and everything else on purpose, that would make the world really beautiful all the time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ageist,

If I put on a backpack, I look like I'm still in high school. I don't know if that will ever go away.

Best,
Pete

Dear Second Love,

The worst part when you cheated was that I still wanted you some right after you told me. It didn't last forever, how I wanted you. But still, it was too long. Even just a little bit of that was too much.

Best,
Pete

Dear That One Girlfriend,

Part of the problem was that I knew, no matter what, you would take me back.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pest,

My old girlfriend, she asked me about words. She would be reading, and she'd say, What does facetious mean? Or she would look up from a book and say, What does bemused mean?

If she called on the phone to ask me about a word, when I picked up and said hello, my old girlfriend would say, Is Mr. Dictionary there? She asked for Mr. Dictionary like he was another guy, a guy she talked to about words.

That girlfriend slept with someone else. And then she wasn't my girlfriend anymore.

We were sort of friends afterwards, just not boyfriend and girlfriend.

She called this one night, this one night that was a little while after she slept with someone else, and she asked if Mr. Dictionary was there. She asked Mr. Dictionary what Promiscuous meant. No kidding.

I don't like to tell people that story because it doesn't sound real, and also because I didn't have some great comeback or anything like that. Mr. Dictionary just said what promiscuous meant, and as soon as he said it, my old girlfriend, I could tell by how her voice got quiet that she knew what just happened.

I don't like to tell people that story because it's not a good story, the good kind of story where someone in the story, anyone in the story, gets what they want.

Best,
Pete

Dear Close Call,

When we were together was the closest I ever came to cheating. I rub my thumbs over my eyebrows the way I do when I'm nervous every time I think about it. Smoothing and unsmoothing the hairs.

I was with my girl friend. Friend who was a girl. We went to my house to get something, I can't remember what, but it was in my bedroom. The girl came in my bedroom with me. It was summer. There was sweat on my friend girl's upper lip. The way it always happened when she was warm.

That's something you shouldn't know about your girl friend. Friend girl. You shouldn't know where she sweats. You shouldn't know about her lips.

While I looked for whatever it was, swim trunks or something, she flopped down on my bed. Her eyes open to the ceiling.

We were friends, but my friends who were just my normal friends didn't lay on my bed. And they didn't stay there after I found the stuff I was looking for. And they didn't wear tank tops and shorts and lay out like that, the way a girl can where it's like you can see her without her clothes on even though she has her clothes on.

And when my normal friends were there, I didn't think about how long it was since I last washed my blankets, or if there was anything near the bed I should hide real quick. I definitely didn't think about what would happen if I got on the bed with my normal friends.

She was there forever. When I found my swim trunks she was still there. Even when I said Let's Go. Even that night when I thought about her there and the sweat and her open eyes. Even when I laid down in the same spot. Even when I slipped the button on my jeans and pulled them off, pulled all my clothes off, and laid in that same spot. She was there forever.

We didn't touch each other. But she was still there.

Best,
Pete

Dear Leggy,

I was going to make a move the time we watched that romance movie together on the couch. Right at the part where the girl in the movie finds out she has to move in with her parents. You looked really nice when that part happened, and I liked laughing with you, your laugh near mine on the couch.

Your leg was right there. Right on the couch where most times it's just me. The skin from your leg was right on the couch because you wore jean shorts.

All the way through the part where the main guy shows up and he's handsome but sort of looks like he lives in a van that doesn't drive anymore, that whole time I thought I would put my hand on your leg.

Then I looked at my hand. It weighed one million pounds. It was made out of a million pounds of dry old beef jerky meat. I was going to smell my hand, but I didn't know how to smell it without looking like I was smelling my hand. A bunch of stuff happened in the movie while I thought about smelling my hand. Someone hit the main guy in the crotch with a bowling ball.

Your leg was still there, but then I couldn't put my million pound jerky hand on your pretty leg. So I left my hand where it was.

The guy's crotch was okay and the woman moved into a house with him, the movie ended happy and then you stood up. Your legs weren't on the couch anymore. It was just me, like how it was most times..

If we did a do-over, I would put my hand on your leg. During the part where the guy and the girl ride bikes in the park and the guy gets chased off his bike by a swarm of hornets.

Best,
Pete

Dear Nora Fries,

My favorite bad guy from Batman is Mr. Freeze. He makes sense.

I never got why the Penguin was a crime lord. He looked like a Penguin, so it meant he had to do crimes? Or the Scarecrow? What's he all about?

Mr. Freeze made sense, though. His wife got sick, so he froze her until he could figure out how to make her better. And then he had an accident and had to be cold all the time.

All the bad stuff he did, that was just because he was trying to make his wife better. All he could think about was making her better, and it started to not matter if he stole things or hurt other people because everything he did was something to make him happy with his wife again.

Mr. Freeze went really far to make it work. He robbed banks and invented freeze guns. Fistfights with Batman. I don't know how much you know about comics, but fist fighting Batman is about the worst idea ever. It's fucking nuts. The guy fistfights immortals. Guys a hundred million times stronger than him from super steroids. Five white Martians, all at the same time. Fist fighting Batman, that's the most nutso thing Mr. Freeze could ever do, and he did that because he had to make his wife better.

I'm not brave as that. Sometimes I was scared to call you on the phone.

It's not fair, though, comparing to Mr. Freeze. His wife is frozen. She never changes. She doesn't decide that maybe she wants to move away to go to school, or that she doesn't like how he leaves too much peanut butter on the knife after he makes a sandwich. She will never leave him, even if he's bad or gets old and boring and doesn't want to go out to breakfast anymore.

Do you think his wife will still love him when she's not frozen anymore? When she sees what he did?

Best,
Pete

Dear Four-Eyes,

I used to wear glasses but now it's contacts. I had kind of a problem with the lady who made my glasses.

Pearle Vision in the mall was the cheapest place for glasses, so that's where I went. The eye doctor appointment and the tests and the drops that burned my eyes were so expensive that if I went to a real doctor, I could barely afford the glasses the tests and the drops said I needed.

At Pearle Vision they would sit you down at this desk and a lady would come out to do a few tests. I don't remember what they were. Because I'm telling you, this Pearle Vision lady, she was stunning. I mean beautiful, TV beautiful.

She was dressed really nice, and she had on a white lab coat, and her hair was pulled back so you could see her face. She wore glasses too. You would forget that the mall was behind you and there was an Arby's next to you. All you could think about was this lady.

She would put some really weird glasses on your face and say, "How is that?"

She looked right in your eyes. She would make you look right in her eyes, her whole face, and then she would ask you how you were feeling.

"Great," I always said,

I never got the right glasses. Something about them was kind of wrong and then my vision would be blurry, or it seemed like I needed new glasses already after I only had them for a few months.

One year I went to a new eye doctor, and she had me read a chart with my glasses on. She said that my prescription was all wrong and that whoever did it missed by a mile. She set up a bunch of other tests, and she made me take my glasses off and look through one of those big masks covered in dials and lenses.

"Here are your glasses now," she said.

Then she twirled a knob and I saw the lenses spin.

"Here's what I'm thinking you need," she said.

The second one was much better.

She said, "I bet you must have a lot of trouble driving at night. We'll get you something new. You'll feel much better."

She didn't ask me if I was feeling better the way the other lady did. But I did. I felt better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Waitress at Chili's,

Sorry for that note with my phone number on it. I swear, it was my friend who told me to leave you my phone number with the check. Which I wouldn't do, but my friend, she said you gave me a look. My friend was trying to be nice.

I had to argue with my friend or leave you a note. I mean, those weren't the ONLY choices. I could have excused myself to drive a couple states over real quick, kill my grandma, and then come back and say, I have to go, my grandma just died.

I could have peed myself at the table.

I could have done some stuff to get out of leaving my number.

There were other options is what I'm saying.

Anyway, I bet people confuse good waitressing with romance all the time. I apologize for making your night a little longer. It really is okay if you never call. Even though I put down my real number.

Best,
Pete

Dear Soggy,

Someone from Oregon told me that he hates the rain here in Colorado. He said the rain here is different, that the drops of water are really cold. In Oregon it's warm.

I've lived here my whole life. I never thought rain could be warm.

I would like to feel what it's like in Oregon when rain is warm.

Best,

Pete

Dear Late Night,

I used to stay at this 24-hour coffee shop really late and study because it was the only place open. I would work and work and nobody ever came up to me and said, You have to leave now.

It would be so late and I would be so tired that I would walk home, and when I was on straight parts of the sidewalk I would close my eyes when I walked. It was kind of a game. It was kind of a game to close my eyes, keep walking, and guess where I was before opening my eyes again.

The 24-hour coffee shop is closed now. I knew it was coming because one of the last times I went in there, one of the ladies who worked there told me. She was really sad. I knew what she felt, I thought, but then I thought about it more and figured I probably didn't know. I could walk into any other coffee shop and do studying, but she couldn't walk into any other coffee shop and work there. And there were probably other people who felt things about it too. Like someone who went there during the day a lot or someone who helped build the building or someone who washed the windows.

People say there are two sides to everything. There's got to be a lot more sides than that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Smiley,

It's really unfair, but I like women who have pretty smiles. Nice teeth. It's unfair because I don't have those things. I don't know that there's anything I can do about it. It feels bad to me. Like if I said I only wanted to date someone who was really skinny but I was really fat.

Pretty smiles and teeth make me happy, though. I can't have it myself, I can't look in the mirror and see it, so maybe that's why I want to look at someone else and see it all the time.

Maybe I have something that somebody with a really pretty smile doesn't have.

Best,
Pete

Dear Weak Spot,

There's a funny thing about video games. When you fight the bosses, the big bad guys, a lot of times they have a weak spot. That's what they call it. The weak spot.

In Zelda there was a caterpillar guy whose weak spot was on the end of his tail. He would whip around, and you could hit him a million times in the head or the middle of his body, but the only thing that hurt him even a little was a hit on the end of his tail.

The weak spots are highlighted a lot of times or they show themselves in special ways. They glow red, or they flash. Once you figure out the weak spot, it's really easy to hurt someone.

It used to seem really stupid. It didn't make sense. How could there be this one spot that really hurt someone while the rest was invincible? How could you be that strong all over, then so weak in this one spot? How was it that the one weak spot on a person glowed red for everyone to see?

It seemed stupid that strong people would walk around with one weak spot, one little place that was so much weaker, bright red. Vulnerable to any adventurer with cute pointy ears and a short sword.

Best,
Pete

Dear Poet,

This great poetry teacher I had told our class that we couldn't use the word Soul. No matter what you wrote, no matter how important it was, you couldn't use that one S-word. It was the only word she didn't let us use, ever. You could say Shit or Fuck or Goddamn or anything if you earned it. Just not Soul.

That rule suited me fine. I figured it would mean I wouldn't have to read so many love poems and all that. That's not why the teacher did it, though.

A word like that, it's a shortcut. No, not even a shortcut. A shortcut is just a quicker way to get to the same place. Using the soul word is a fast way to say what you want to say, but you still don't get there.

A word like that needs more unpacking. That word is just the cardboard box. Someone wrote SOUL across the top and sides in black marker.

Inside the box is all the stuff that you need.

If you open the box and start unpacking, there's all of those jars and cups you made with your hands. There's the way you held that baby and talked to her without using a baby voice. There's the truth and the stuff you made up, all in there the same, all mixed together.

When you were here I made sure all that stuff was unpacked. I didn't use the word Soul when I talked about you. I left all the pieces out, left the box unpacked, cluttered the shelves and bookcases with you.

Now all your stuff is put away again in the SOUL box. The little word that keeps it safe. I don't want to look at it anymore. It's too much, too hard. I do think you have a good soul. You're still in there, all inside the SOUL Box. That word that keeps your things safe and keeps me safe from your things, from the unpacked, beautiful messes that filled my nightstands and stacked on my tabletops and ate up all the Saturdays.

There are two ways to misuse the word Soul. One is using the label, what's on the outside of the box to tell what's inside. To say it without unpacking it. The other way is because you're afraid that if you start unpacking that box again, it's going to be hard to cram it all back, get the flaps closed, and put it away again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Co-Pilot,

The biggest fights I ever had were in the car.

Like this one time. Me and my best friend, we're lost around Chicago. It must be three hours into a 20 minute drive. We start yelling at each other every time an exit comes up, asking each other if this was the exit. Neither of us know. The next day we laugh about it.

With my brother. We're pulling a trailer and he has a hard time backing it up. I make him switch me so I can do it for him when we stop at a motel. I could have been nicer about it. We end up eating a pancake dinner at a Village Inn. A booth of strippers sits right behind us, and we giggle like little boys because we hear what they talk about.

Maybe the fights in the car, maybe that's why I like walking.

If we fight and it's in the car, I'm sorry. I hope it will be funny later.

Best,
Pete

Dear Honesty,

When I coached track runners, I sometimes had to tell them about deodorant. They were fourteen. When you're a little kid, you don't smell bad the same way you do when you're fourteen. Then you wake up, you're fourteen, and the stink starts.

I always tried to be nice, talk to them away from everyone else. Sometimes I even gave them a deodorant because I knew if it was me, I would hate to know I smell and spend the rest of the day like that.

The kids I told were always mad. Then most of the time those were the kids that liked me. When they weren't mad anymore, they figured out I wouldn't say they smelled to hurt them. How it was different to say something bad if it helps someone.

They say you can't change a person. But there are a couple kids out there, well not kids anymore, a couple people out there who smell real nice. That's something I changed. Something I did.

Best,
Pete

Dear Old Flame,

That wasn't fair, how you got mad at me when we looked at pictures from high school.

You kept saying how skinny you looked, and why would I like a girl who looked like that.

In the pictures you were seventeen and I was seventeen. It makes sense for people who are seventeen to like other people who are seventeen.

It's like...I liked music then, and I like music now. And the music I liked then, I really liked it. I thought it's what I would like forever, and if someone had told me then that I could get a Godsmack tattoo, maybe I would have.

I like music now, and I don't like that stuff anymore. I would be pretty upset about that Godsmack tattoo.

What I'm saying is, I think I liked you when you were seventeen and I was seventeen. But that doesn't mean that I would like the seventeen year-old version of you now, now that I'm older. I liked Godsmack when I was 17 too. Probably because that's music for people who are 17.

I don't like the things from when I was 17 now. But it doesn't mean I can't like it then. It doesn't mean I can't like you now.

Best,
Pete

Dear Heavy,

Some of the books at my work are so thick they break their own backs.

When you open a book to the first page, all the page weight is on the right. That's hard on a book's spine.

When you're in the middle of a book's story, the page weight pulls both ways.

Then, when you get near the end, all the page weight is on the left. That's hard too.

Some books have so much stuff inside, it's almost like they weren't meant to open.

Once they're open, once their insides are all exposed, the weight cracks them apart.

There are things binderies can do. Stronger spines, better glues, things like that. I just wonder if maybe all the insides weren't supposed to open up.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lucky,

The first time I stayed at your place, I didn't think I was going to stay at your place. I thought I would stop by, then head home. It didn't happen that way, though. Which was good.

The bad part was I parked in a place where they give parking tickets. That neighborhood was the one where people said, Don't park there. They said, You won't get away with it.

I thought about moving my car. For the first couple hours I was at your place, I thought about it.

In the morning, there was just a little snow settled over the ground outside. Nothing serious, nothing that would slow you down. But enough that it covered my windshield and everyone's windshield, so no one could look for the stickers that let you park in that neighborhood.

It turned out okay. Better than okay. I stayed. I didn't get a ticket. And I really like the snow.

What didn't work out is I didn't learn anything. Instead of telling you when I was worried about something else going on, about moving my car, I didn't say anything. It worked itself out.

Some stuff, though, some stuff doesn't work itself out. The night doesn't always have a few inches of snow for me, waiting to cover my mistakes.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tester,

Where did you pick up that habit where you set everything down on the edge?

Every time I saw a water glass you'd set down on the nightstand, part of the cup hung off the edge. Or if you left a plate on the counter, it was part way off the edge.

I don't think you did it to make me mad. But you must have done it for something. Was it more exciting that way? Was it more exciting because you had to be careful not to spill, or was it more exciting because of how I would get mad about that even though I didn't get mad when you backed my car into a pole or kissed your ex on the cheek?

Did you feel like I didn't care except when the edge was right there?

Best,
Pete

Dear Kitty Mourner,

When your cat died it wrecked our vacation. You got mad at me because I wanted you to be happy on vacation. I got mad at you because I wanted you to be happy on vacation. You cried outside the hotel. The lobby was all glass and I knew people inside the hotel could see fight and see you cry and see that I was angry and how I didn't hold onto you.

I said that when your cat died it wrecked our vacation. What I meant was, When your cat died, I wrecked our vacation.

Best,
Pete

Dear Points for Neatness,

When I was a kid I got good grades in handwriting, took my time with letters. The P in the beginning of my name, I drew the stick, and then the bubble at the top really slow, and I even used the side of my pencil lead so the bubble part of the P was thicker at the top and then thinner at the bottom.

Then I stopped. My letters got worse and worse. The P at the beginning of my name was a stick and a bubble still, but there weren't thick parts and thin parts. The bubble wasn't even in the right spot most of the time.

Now my words sit horrible on the page. I get worried that I'll leave my notebook somewhere by accident. I don't worry someone will read it. I don't think anyone could. I worry someone will think that the person writing in it is making plans to kill a President just by how bad the letters look.

I'm sorry I didn't keep up my handwriting and the note I gave you looked so bad. I always thought writing fast would be more important than writing nice.

Best,
Pete

Dear Casting Director,

Thanks for not coming up with any answers when my friend asked which famous people I look like. He's obsessed with that. Most of the time I don't like the answers for me.

Saying you look just like someone with an ugly face is the same thing as telling someone they have an ugly face. Even if the ugly face is famous.

Best,
Pete

Dear Knitting Victim,

The idea I got for one Christmas was that I would knit you a scarf. That I, Pete, would learn to be a knitter.

The thought that counts. I had a lot of thoughts. I thought how bad I wanted to give you something like that. I thought how good you would look in a nice scarf. I thought how you always said scarves were too short to twist twice around your neck for when you got really cold.

A lot of thought went in. So did a couple trips to the hobby store and a lot of pulls at yarn and at least one Motherfucker or Fuck for every pull at the yarn. A lot of thought went in. Not much scarf came out.

Best,
Pete

Dear Animal Lover,

Thanks for the zoo trip on Christmas. I don't really like Christmas very much, but the zoo was almost empty. It was good to walk around and talk to you instead of having to do all that crazy Christmas stuff where there's paper everywhere and people yell and everyone seems to forget about breakfast.

Thanks for bringing cocoa too, and for bringing it in a metal thing that kept it so warm. And for only bringing one cup for us both to drink out of.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pal,

The nicknames started out easy. It was just chopping the end off your name.

Valentine was an easy one. Then Palatine, like the suburb in Chicago. Then Palestine. Then Clementine.

Each name made new names.

Valenstein. Palendrome. Velodrome.

You'd leave your name alone in a room, then there were three more when you came back.

Volare. Valn Gogh.

I couldn't stop, Valencia.

A really smart man said something to me. He said if you use the perfect word for something, that's it. You find the perfect word and you don't have to think about it anymore, Val-Pack.

He said that when you find the perfect word for something, you can get away from it. It's in the box with the label on it, and then it's done.

I wasn't ready. To say your name the last and right way.

Best,
Pete

Dear Balm,

Thanks for all the chapsticks.

I'm sorry I didn't use them.

I got mad because I thought you were saying I had to use chapsticks because you didn't like kissing my cracked lips. I didn't understand. I didn't understand how it would hurt you even though they were my lips.

Best,

Pete

Dear Magellan,

The trouble you had folding maps.

I remember.

Whenever we were on vacation somewhere, you would take the map and try, but then just end up folding it whatever way. Never flat again. It always stayed sort of puffy. It unfolded and opened by itself while it rested on a table at the motel. By the end of the vacation there were always holes and white lines of weak paper at the folds.

How your maps looked after we came home. Tired. Lived. Like those maps didn't belong back with our regular lives.

Those maps, they looked like our vacations.

Best,
Pete

Dear Live Studio Audience,

When I was a kid I had this weird habit where I would watch sitcoms and rewrite the jokes in my head. A lot of the jokes were fine, but if one sounded not right I would sit on the living room floor and try to figure it out. How you could change around the order or do something so the joke was better.

A lot of times the joke was stuck how it was. There wasn't a lot you could do with it. And then I'd miss a big piece of the show because I was thinking about that joke instead of listening and watching.

I still watch a lot of comedy shows. I like them because I can think about changing the jokes around. It's something to do.

It's harder for me with serious shows. To change it around. You can change a joke around and it doesn't have to change everything. A joke doesn't mean as much. Serious stuff is more complicated.

It was hard for me to say serious stuff with you. It's not your fault. It was just easier to say jokes. Jokes you can fix later. Or not. They don't really matter, and that's what I like about them. That's what makes them easier. That and all the practice. I don't know which shows to watch so I can practice the serious stuff.

Best,
Peter

Dear Clementine,

It was so great when you got that job at the candy factory. I didn't even know there was such a thing as candy factories in real life.

You told me some about it, but I always had more questions. Always.

You told me how some days were hard because you worked further down the line, and on days when Carlos was the candy chef nobody could keep up. You told me how shouting, "Carlos is working" was the same thing as shouting "I'm behind," and someone would come help you twist candy canes. You could never even see Carlos, but you could just tell Carlos was there by how many candy canes were coming down the line.

You never told me about how the candy canes got twisted, though. And you never told me what kind of trays they cook the candy in. You never really told me any of the secrets.

When I started asking a lot of questions, you told me I should come on a tour. So I signed up. I was going to surprise you, but when I got there everyone else in the tour was retarded. I mean actually retarded. They all came in a van together. We waited in this office room, and one guy had his head tilted down like he had no bones in his neck, and his tongue was just hanging there, drying in the air.

The tour wasn't what I thought it would be like, and not just because I was the only person there who wasn't either responsible for a group of retarded people or retarded myself. We just walked through a hallway and looked through glass at people standing at assembly lines. We didn't get to talk to anyone. I thought I would get to walk down the line, smell the candy and try wrapping a candy cane in shrink wrap. I thought I would probably meet Carlos.

But it was all the workers staring straight down, wrapping lumps of licorice coal in time for Christmas. They didn't look happy at all. They just watched the candy, and it was like it wasn't even candy. It was stuff they just wrapped up or watched go down on a conveyor. It didn't matter what the stuff was. It wasn't fun.

I left the tour early. I told the lady who took us on the tour that I was thirsty and dizzy. One of the people responsible who was with the retarded people looked at me with a look like, "I know you feel fine and you're just leaving because you don't want to be in this group of retarded people all day."

The truth is I didn't want you to look up through the glass and see me smiling and waving, surrounded by retarded people. But I also didn't want to pass through where you were working and for you to look sad and like you didn't want to work at the candy factory anymore. Which I knew you didn't.

Best,
Pete

Dear Braced for Impact,

You were right.

I liked when you wore my shirt. It looked good on you, and when I looked at you it was like a reminder that we were together, but only for me and nobody else because nobody else knew that was my shirt.

So you were right. I didn't need it for anything. I just kind of felt like things weren't going well. I took that shirt home, and that was me bracing for impact. I had to get ready somehow, even if all it meant was clutching at a shirt.

Best,
Pete

Dear Chun-Li,

The new bar here has a *Street Fighter II* cabinet. It's that game where it's you and another person, and you kick and punch each other until one person can't take being kicked or punched anymore and falls down.

When I was a kid, I played it all the time. I would play like a crazy person. Wild kicks and punches, just hoping to make something connect. Or I would do special moves all the time because they were cool, fireballs and upside-down kicks and all that stuff.

I never got very good. My guy hit the ground first most of the time.

This thing I heard, though, it was a guy saying that when you play games like that, it's not about the kicking and punching and all of that. It's about who controls the space.

When your guy twirls his hands and makes a fireball out of nothing and it burns across the screen, you control the horizontal space made by the path of the fireball. When your guy does a flying uppercut move, you own the vertical space.

When you own the space, you can beat anybody. You can make the other guy do whatever you want. The other person has to deal with you instead of doing his own fireballs or ultra dragon kicks.

Sometimes when me and you would fight, words fight, I would do it. Figure out your moves. Own all the space. Divide the argument about pizza lunches with your old boyfriend into a grid and then take slices and strips out of it until there was nowhere for you to jump out of the way. Fireball, fireball, fireball.

In fights, word fights, I wanted you to hear what I said. All of it. The parts about how I was mad you ate pizza with your old boyfriend on Thursdays. And the parts about how it made me mad because I was scared. And the parts where other things besides Pizza Thursday got made up. Like Sandwich Friday and then Cocktail Saturday Night and then Brunch Sunday.

I shouldn't have taken over the space like that. Shouldn't have made it so only I was talking. I wish I'd seen more of your special moves.

Best,
Pete

Dear Reactor,

When our hotel messed up and instead of one big bed we had two twin beds. They were small, and I knew I wouldn't be comfortable if we slept in one together, so I said I was tired and maybe we should sleep in separate beds.

Being with someone, it can feel like a million little things you have to do. A million little things that go wrong. A billion billion things you did that turned everything out like this.

Later on it's maybe the five things you didn't do that really kill.

Best,
Pete

Dear Gifter,

You gave me the best gifts. I hate birthdays and Christmas and all of that, but you gave the right kinds of gifts.

This includes the Riddler coffee cup you shoplifted from a flea market.

Best,
Pete

Dear Down the Drain,

When I stopped liking you and we were still together, I took long showers whenever you came over. That's how I got time for myself. Some of those showers, some of the time I was in there, I would turn on the water and lay a towel down on the bathroom floor and sit. A little time to be by myself in that noise and in that place where no one would come looking for me. I needed it.

One time I didn't even get in the shower at all. I forgot. Then I had to get my hair wet in the sink so you didn't know I sat on the floor the whole time and how bad I needed to not be near anybody for a minute.

Best,
Pete

Dear Friendly,

If I'd known how many of our friends would stick by you when we broke up, I would have dated you anyway. It was worth it.

Please don't tell them I said that.

And please tell them I say Hi.

Best,

Pete

Dear Palatine,

You always used to say, Pete, there was a real good moon last night.

You always used to say, Did you see it?

And after we were only friends you still said it to me.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Best,

Pete

Dear Photographed,

There's a picture you gave me from when you were a little kid. Remember the one I'm talking about?

It's Christmas, and you're standing in the living room with a long Looney Tunes shirt on. There's something in your hand, maybe an umbrella, and you look up into the camera with your mouth closed, chin pointed. Very serious in a little kid way.

It was really good of you to give me that picture. I still look at it, but not too much. You can't help but think that this little girl will have some really nice times and some really bad ones. She doesn't know about any of that yet, that girl in the picture.

That little girl didn't fight with me late at night over the phone yet, and she didn't get mad at me for making her feel like I forgot about her the minute she left the room. There was a lot of other stuff too. It wasn't all me that did bad stuff.

But it feels terrible. Because I know that little girl grows up and she's sad a lot.

It's terrible what happens to that little girl's heart, and when she's in the picture, she doesn't know it yet. It feels terrible how I know and that little girl doesn't.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pipeline,

I trashed your cubby. Those drawers for your stuff that you called your cubby. Where you kept your staying the night things. The one you painted green on the outside and some of the paint got brushed onto the drawer pulls. The big fat jewel knobs.

The one you laid paper printed with columbines down inside to cover the wood and hold off the splinters.

The one I shoved into the corner of the room so when the closet was open it was like your cubby wasn't even there.

All that stuff. The secret stuff, the paint on the knobs, the columbine paper. All the work you did to make it so these drawers were your little home inside my home. I didn't see that stuff until today. Until I pulled the drawers out so I could carry them to the dumpster.

Best,
Pete

Dear Claw Master,

I'll never understand how you always won me stuff out of the claw machine at the grocery store.

How you could scout out a toy that was ready to tip into the chute. How you could steer the metal pincers around. How you could claw onto just the right one and drop it down into chute. How you could reach behind the door where there wasn't anything before you put a dollar in, and now there was a whole thing in there.

I'll never understand how you did the stuff you did.

Best,
Pete

Dear Joker,

I never liked your jokes. I didn't like them because they weren't really your jokes. All those jokes about what you get when you cross something with something else, or what happens when you answer a door, or when a bunch of different church guys go in a bar together. Those were jokes someone else said, and you just remembered what someone else said and then told me.

I didn't get it then. How even if you didn't make up the joke about the rabbi and the nun or the bartender and the duck, you took the time to memorize them. Which means the rabbi and the nun and the bartender and the duck were at least a little important to you. Which means they should have been at least a little important to me.

Best,
Peter

Dear Owl Fan,

At a store I'll see something you would like. Something to go perfect with all your owl stuff. I got used to picking out that stuff, so now it all sticks out.

I saw an owl mug, and I picked it up and looked at the price on the bottom. It wasn't very expensive, and I thought about you even though we don't talk anymore.

This mug, it was a whole owl. Not a mug with a picture of an owl. The whole cup was an owl's body and his big round eyes. His wing out for a handle, like if an owl played the I'm a Little Teapot game.

In line for the register, I tried to think what to write on the card so I could give you the mug and you wouldn't think it was me trying to do anything. The words that would make a gift okay.

I saw this and thought you might really like it.

That sounded too much like I bought an owl something for you so you'd like me again.

This looks a lot like that one you have on your desk, the one with pencils in it.

That just made me think about your bedroom. And I don't know if you still have that other owl, and I don't know if you keep your pencils in it anymore. I might be really out of touch and stupid.

I saw this and it reminded me of you.

That sounded almost mean, kind of like I blame you for what I think about.

I got out of line to think about words for the card, and then I put the mug back on the shelf where I got it. I couldn't think of anything to write that would make it okay to give you the mug. So I had to leave it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ponderer,

This girl I was seeing, she wouldn't play hypothetical questions with me. I came up with a bunch of good ones, but when I'd say, "Would you rather" she would stop me. "Pete," she'd say. She called me Peter except when she was tired of me. "Pete," she'd say, "I don't like this game,"

She wasn't wrong. A lot of the questions were about piss or shit or sex with Danny DeVito.

Still, it's my favorite game. I write down questions all the time.

Like this:

You can have one of these two things:

Option 1: Batman's utility belt and all the stuff in it. You can use everything in there without getting in trouble. So you could throw a Batarang at someone's head or shoot off a smoke bomb at the movies and you won't get in any trouble.

Option 2: You can have the Batmobile, same deal. You can speed, bash other cars off the road, use machine guns to shoot a hole through a wall and drive straight through.

Whatever you answer, I'll still love you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ponderer,

Did you decide about my last letter? Batmobile or utility belt?

The right answer is Batmobile because think how useful that is. You could drive 90 everywhere.

Batmobile is the right answer, but I would go utility belt.

I'd be late even if I had the Batmobile. I could get to work in one minute, which means I would leave three minutes after I was supposed to be there. Even in the Batmobile with no laws, I'd still be late. Oh, and getting out of the Batmobile to sit at my desk all day? How does that possibly work?

The utility belt would be way more fun. Smoke bombs, a grappling hook gun. I mean, I could see gassing myself with knockout gas a couple times on accident in my apartment, but even that's fun in its own way. Everyone drives a car to work. Not many people have a story where they chomp down on a gas pellet because they thought it was a Mike & Ike.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cassiopeia,

Last weekend I moved to a new apartment. Everything had to go. Eight years of everything.

Someone came to pick up the old couch. The books. And the boards the books sat on. And the bricks the boards sat on.

The hardest thing to get rid of was the stars.

Remember the stars? The ones that glowed in the dark. The ones we put up in my bedroom, the first bedroom that wasn't my bedroom from home.

We opened the plastic package. I started trying to make Orion from the way I remembered him in the real sky. You put up constellations of your own. We both tried to figure out what to do with the glow-in-the-dark footprints that came in the package, and you stuck one up on the wall near the light switch at the other end of the room so I could find it if I woke up at night in my new bedroom, the one that wasn't my bedroom from home.

When I pulled them down last weekend, that's when I remembered. How they were near the spot on my desk where I stood with one foot on the desktop, one on a rolling chair. How most of the other ones were around the same spot, the space above the bed where we could both stand and reach the ceiling.

I moved last weekend. I got rid of a mirror and pictures of fruit that were hanging in the kitchen. Then I cleaned the bathtub one last time. Then I pulled down the whole sky.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hoarder,

Do you keep old love notes? I'm sure you must have gotten tons by now.

I started out keeping all of the love notes I got. Even from exes. It helped remind me what things were like when we were happy together.

When I moved away from home I threw a bunch out. I thought, What if my new girlfriend finds them? Will that make her mad?

I didn't know, but I thought the amount it made her mad would be more than the amount they made me happy, so I threw some away.

I keep things, though. Little things that I like and you can't tell are from ex-girlfriends.

I have a box with pictures cut from Spider-Man comics glued all over it. It had stuff inside from when we were a couple, like a honey packet because she always used to take honey packets when we were at a breakfast place. Once in a while she took seedless grape jam because it was her grandma's favorite and her grandma had diverticulitis, which meant she could only eat seedless kinds of jam.

I kept that box, but I threw out the honey and the seedless jam, because if someone opened the box and found a honey or a jam in there, well, I would have to explain the whole story. Explaining it, with the breakfast and the diverticulitis, it doesn't sound as much the past as I want it to.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fatty Fat,

I used to make fun of this girl in elementary school for being fat. You know, make up little songs and stuff about how she was fat.

I felt really bad about it later. It was a mean thing to do.

I think sometimes when you're a kid you think that if you don't make fun of someone that they'll start making fun of you. Then you won't know what to do because you didn't make fun of anyone and you don't know how to do it back.

It turns out that I was wrong. You don't have to practice to be mean. It's a natural talent, for me anyway. It's mostly harder to not say mean things. Nice is what you have to make sure and practice.

I don't say things like Hey Fatty or Hey Fatso anymore. But I still think them sometimes. Are there people who don't have to stop themselves?

Best,
Pete

Dear Odor Police,

There should be some kind of rule that when your girlfriend leaves, nobody else can buy her kind of perfume. A restraining order, but for smells.

You'll be on the train. You'll be looking at magazines when a woman brushes past.

You'll be looking at the filthy tiles in line at a sandwich store, breathe in, then stop.

You'll hold the breath until you remember that perfume. Then you'll lock that breath inside.

And then every time this happens, every time you breathe out the smell of your girlfriend all the way out of your body, you lose her again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Engineer,

I used to think it might be kind of fun to be a train engineer. Not fun, but something I could do. You'd get to see a lot of places. Big places that don't have much people. Those places sound good to me. The noise might be hard, but I like noise sometimes. It makes it easier to think things inside your head.

So I picked up a book about trains to see if it's something I would like. The book said a lot of train engineers kill people. It's not their fault. Someone will stop their car on the tracks, on purpose sometimes, and there's nothing the train engineer can do. Or in some places, people ride on top of trains. When they're waiting for a new train they'll sleep in between the tracks so the rumbling will wake them up. Some of them wake up and some of them don't wake up. Some of them sleep there because they're afraid of snakes and they think the tracks are too tall and the snakes can't get in between. People who are more afraid of snakes than they are of trains rest in between the rails. Sometimes people riding up top, on top of a train, sometimes a branch will hit them off the train.

When the engineer sees the cars or the people, there's nothing he can do about it. It takes a long time to slow down a train. A really long time. There's no such thing as slamming on the brakes.

One train engineer in the book, he said he doesn't even put on the brakes. He says a prayer for whoever just got sucked under.

It's hard to do life where you don't hurt someone now and then, even if it's not your fault most of the time. But at least with the people I hurt, I get the chance to say I'm sorry.

Best,
Pete

Dear Spare,

It's been a long time since I locked myself out. It used to happen a lot. Slam the car door just a beat too early, lose a key from my pocket. Calling the landlord at night. Walking home without keys, then walking back where I was, then walking home again. There had to be a good place for hiding keys. Under the mat, but not as stupid. In the porch light, but not as easy. Everyone knows about those stupid fake rocks. Is it hard to cut a real rock in half?

I asked people at work what they do, and almost all of them said they had to call their husbands or their wives or their girlfriends they live with, and then they can go back home.

Are fake rocks for keys only for lonely people?

Best,
Pete

Dear Advice Seeker,

Sorry that I didn't say much when you asked me if I wanted to give your son advice. About girls. About getting dumped by girls.

If your son ever needs something else. If he wants to learn about books or needs someone to read over a paper or someone to explain what overdraft protection is or someone with a strong opinion on cold brew coffee or someone to help carry a sleeper sofa up the stairs, ask me again. Anything. Someone to bring over a drain auger or show him how to break in a pair of boots or cook al dente pasta at altitude. Anything else, really. Ask me anything else.

Best,
Pete

Dear Perfect 10,

If you could look at a crystal ball and know when your very best ten minutes were going to be, would you want to know?

I don't know what it means, exactly. I guess maybe it's when you look the best. Or maybe if you're an athlete, it's when you're strong and fast.

But what if you said Yes, and you saw, and then the crystal ball said your best ten minutes already happened?

What if it wasn't all that much, that good part of you? What if the ten minutes wasn't very great?

Best,
Pete

Dear Hidden,

Did you have a secret hiding place when you were a kid? I was always trying to make one. I made a rope ladder to get up in the tree in our front yard. You couldn't climb very high and the leaves weren't thick, so you couldn't hide.

There were some bushes on the side of my house, so I made a kind of a lean-to there. That was fun, but I had to take it down because my mom was afraid it would collapse on top of me. Same thing with the snow cave. And the fox hole with the stick roof. She was right about the fox hole.

When I got older I gave up on secret hiding places a little, but then I had to clean the gutters one time and when I was on the roof, I decided to stay up there for a while. I brought comic books up the ladder and laid out over the shingles. Even though I was older, my mom said not to read comic books on the roof because I could roll off and smash into the pavement.

I always wanted a little place just for me. Not like an explorer who wants to claim a whole country or something. Just a somewhere for me to hide out.

My first apartment got sort of like that. Just for me. I could hide there. I put up curtains over the regular curtains so you couldn't even tell if the lights were on from outside. No one knew I was in there.

I tried to be quiet too so my neighbors wouldn't know for sure.

My mom wasn't there to warn me about how it's dangerous. Not dangerous in the same way where the ceiling might fall on top of me and kill me. But having your own place to hide is still sort of dangerous. It still can change into something bad. It still crushed me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Generous,

Me and my dad went snowboarding once. Just me and him. It was different from how it was with our whole family. He didn't park at the parking lot. Instead he parked along the road and we sledded our snowboards through the trees and onto the slope. Like we were secret bandits. Me and him getting away with something.

We rode all day. When the whole family came we would stop for lunch. But we didn't stop that day, me and him. We rode up the chairs together. Sometimes we talked, but sometimes we just listened to our tape players. I didn't know what he was listening to. I had a tape I made that was just three songs over and over because they seemed like good snowboarding songs.

It started snowing. When our whole family came, we'd usually quit when it snowed. It got cold. But I didn't ever get cold. Just my hands or my feet, but I was too warm almost all the time so I liked it, and my dad said Batten Down The Hatches like he always said, and we kept going.

My dad had some things he always said. Dad stuff that he said all the time with his way of saying things.

When it was time to leave the house, he would say, Shoes, Socks, Service. Or when me and my brothers were fist fighting, he would stop us and say, Clean Break. I never knew where these things were coming from, and I didn't know what they meant. Shoes, socks, service. Service?

He had this other one too. From his work. He worked at the hospital, putting people to sleep before surgery. He would tell them, You Will Wake Up Feeling Refreshed And Remembering Nothing.

That sounded so nice. He could still be a doctor, but he could still say something that sounded like, Everything Is Going To Be Okay.

That whole day snowboarding was kind of like that thing he said at work About the feeling refreshed. It happened. And then I felt better because my dad spent time with me. Me and him.

And the part about remembering nothing. I remember the snow. And the tape with the same three songs. And parking behind the trees. But I don't remember what my dad said that day, or what we talked about. I don't remember sitting next to him in the car. I don't remember what he was like.

I felt better. Refreshed.

Now it's over. I don't remember a thing.

Best,
Pete

Dear Compulsive,

I used to have a really bad problem with little rituals around the house. This was when I was pretty young, middle school.

Things had to be touched in a certain order before bed. With a certain hand, a certain number of times. I had to go up and down the stairs a certain way, a certain order, a certain number of times.

This is all hard to explain.

Think of it like luck, the way someone would panic if they shattered a mirror.

Think of it like a religion, where people know it's there and feel it there even when they can't really say how.

Think of it like luck and like religion where there are rules. I knew that good numbers were 2, 4, 6, 10 and 14. Middle-of-the-road numbers were 1, 5, 7, and 9. I didn't use those much because they were so close to good numbers. Bad numbers were 3 and 8. The worst.

The house had to be sealed up with touches on door handles and climbing the stairs after everyone went to bed. If someone got up to pee I would have to get up and redo everything. All night.

Every room had its own thing. There were bathroom rituals. Touch everything a certain number of times.

It got to be so much I started peeing outside. Shivers outside in the winter, peeing off the little wooden deck, pushing the dog away with one leg while I peed.

A small ritual would expand and expand until each ritual had its own set of rules and set of rituals underneath it. Each one had as many working parts as a car engine. As a religion. As a faith.

I would put everything in the right pocket of my jeans, and everything that went in there stayed in there, transferred into the right pocket of the next pair I wore. An old keyring, some coins. One day I put a shoelace in there. It was an accident. A mistake that had to stay. I cried with my hand still shoved in my pocket when I woke up to what I'd done.

There was the way I moved my body around in a space. If I came around the right side of someone's desk, I had to make sure and leave on the right side. Imagine you were walking, and all day there was string spooling out behind you. I had to move back the way I came to keep that string from getting caught on things.

It felt like if I didn't do these things, something bad would happen. Usually it wasn't something specific, not like losing an eye or something. Just that something bad would happen. Bad enough to get me out of bed over and over, every night.

Then I stopped doing almost all of it.

What happened was I got sad. I didn't care if the bad things happened to me anymore. I thought, there can't be anything more bad than dying, and I don't really care if that happens.

That was a really long time ago. I haven't done it for a while, not like that anyway. Sometimes I still touch door frames with my right hand and stuff like that. It must not be too noticeable because nobody mentions it, but I wanted to tell you because I never told anybody.

When I think back about those late nights all by myself, creeping up and down the stairs just the right number of times, it would be nice to look back at that and think that even if you didn't know about it then, you would know about it now and think about the person who had to

do that stuff. Almost like that kid wasn't alone.

Best,
Pete

Dear Checkout Lady,

I hope you didn't think I looked at your breasts.

I mean, I sort of did.

I have a bad habit where it's hard to look at people, at their eyes. So I kind of look at their chin sometimes, or their forehead, but not the eyes. It helps when people wear glasses because then you can look at their glasses frames.

What happened was I looked at your chin, but then I saw your breasts. And then I looked at them, and then I'm pretty sure you saw me look.

Sorry about that.

The rest of the time, even though I didn't look at your eyes, I didn't look at your breasts either. It was just your chin some more.

For what it's worth, you have a very nice chin.

Fuck it. Nice breasts too.

Best,
Pete

Dear Barista,

When you put the lid on my coffee, you must have swiped your wrist across the top. With every drink I could smell your perfume. It's a perfume some other people use, too.

I know you didn't do it to be cruel. But be careful, okay?

Best,
Pete

Dear Savior,

In the car with a woman, a co-worker, we had to stop quick at a light. My co-worker hit the brakes and did that thing, threw her right arm out across my chest to stop me flying forward.

I was fine. Everything was fine. I didn't almost shoot out the windshield or anything. Maybe the tiniest chirp from her tires.

The dangerous part was the touch. People who work together don't usually touch.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hallmark,

Cards are supposed to make it easier to say stuff that's hard to say. Stuff about how you feel.

Cards don't need to say stuff about how old people look funny in swimsuits. Or about how monkeys like to joke around. They don't need to say stuff about farting.

Get it together and help me with the tough stuff, please.

Best,

Pete

Dear Rager,

One time for work I had to call a woman at her home. Her husband answered the phone. When I asked if I could talk to his wife, he said hold on and then he shouted. Loud. Shouted his wife's name so hard that the phone hurt my ear.

People talk to each other like that. They talk to their wives like that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Romantic Comedy Writer,

I had these two friends, a guy and a girl. They did that thing you see in the movies where they said if they were both forty and not married, they would get married.

The guy would have married her right then when they made the deal. He would marry her now.

The girl won't marry him. Not when they're both forty. Not when she's fifty or ever.

It's terrible how things from movies don't work out very romantic when they're real. I wish you wouldn't give people ideas like that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Produce Picker,

People at the store pick out the worst fruits.

Picking good fruit is a science, but it's an easy kind of science.

What makes an orange good? Juicy. The juice is heavy, so the heavy oranges are best.

What makes an apple bad? If it's too mealy and soft. Squeeze those apples.

Strawberries are tricky. Some things will only get better after you take them home. But strawberries are done when you get to them. They only get worse.

Watermelon is the hardest. If it's got a big ugly dirty yellow side, take it home. That flat yellow dirty part means it wasn't harvested too early. Someone let it rest. The ones that are green all around, those ones were taken too early.

You can't help but feel like you made the wrong choice when you leave the store with an ugly watermelon. Like everyone thinks you're a fool. We all know that pretty is good and ugly is bad. But trust me, ugly is good for watermelons.

It's a hard habit to break, picking out what's pretty. And as much as I'd like to endorse going home with an ugly watermelon to give it a try, I understand that it might be too much, always explaining away ugly.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lunchlady,

This guy used to park his van in my work's lot every day and sit in there and eat lunch. Sometimes I could hear what sounded like his radio if I walked past.

He could go wherever he wanted and he sat out in his van. I hated him.

Then I started doing almost the same thing. And it's not bad. I mean, it's bad to hate work so much that you sit in your car. But it's not bad to get away from a place where nobody there has seen you cry and you could draw the lines and numbers from the clock so perfect that you could lay the drawing right on top of the real clock, that's how much you watch.

From outside your car, you look sad.

From inside, you don't even think about it. From inside it's a chair and a sandwich and a radio and nobody else is there to stumble in and ask if you called about more paper yet.

The break part of a lunch break is that you don't have to pretend anything. You don't have to pretend you're not scared about your lunch break every day. You don't have to pretend you have somewhere to eat. You really do have somewhere to eat. Even if that place is the parking lot at the dentist's office. Even if it means spilling barbecue sauce in your car.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cake-Eater,

Sometimes at the store I buy fancy cookies, the ones that come in the tall white bag. I like that the bag stands up straight. Or I'll buy the variety box too, the one that has eight different cookies in it. You have to decide which one to eat next instead of grabbing whatever cookie is on top.

Most people who buy those boxes must be having parties or something. Maybe they're ladies who have book clubs.

It's a little bit embarrassing for me to buy the variety box. I don't look like someone who has a book club. I don't want anyone to think about me and these cookies alone.

I buy the box like most people buy condoms. I have to get some other stuff so it doesn't look like I made a special trip just for fancy variety cookies.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lady Friend,

I always wanted to say, Leave your husband.

I didn't know how to say it right. I didn't want you to think I wanted you to leave your husband and be with me.

I didn't think you should be with your husband. He wasn't very nice to you. But he was kind of right.

Best,
Pete

Dear the Donnas,

One time, when I was alone a really long time, I listened to one of your songs and all it took was a girl voice up close in headphones to get me hard. I was walking outside, and I had to stop and shift around so I could walk back home.

I don't know how you might feel about that, but that's how it happened.

Best,
Pete

Dear Scented,

One time a girl sent me a note that smelled like her perfume. It wasn't the love kind of note. Just the thank you kind.

When I opened the note, I could smell that girl there. Kind of an almond smell, kind of a coconut. It was faint. Not like when you read magazines and it's like someone sprayed snake venom in your eyes.

I asked a co-worker, Do you spray cards and stuff with perfume before you send them out?

She said no. I got the card out of my desk drawer so she could smell it. She said, I recognize that smell.

She passed it to another coworker who said, Yeah.

My one coworker said, Maybe she keeps cards in a drawer with her perfume. My one coworker said that happened with her wedding invitations. She had them in her dresser and they all kind of smelled like perfume when she sent them out.

So either this girl was thinking about me a lot and sprayed perfume on a Thank You card with a drawing of a porcupine on the front.

Or she wasn't thinking about how her desk drawer and her perfume and her cards would make things confusing for me.

Either she was thinking about me a lot. Or she wasn't thinking about me at all.

Best,
Pete

Dear Starving,

There's a way to test if something is edible, a plant or something like that. Let's say you were starving in the woods and you weren't sure that a mushroom was okay to eat.

Rub it on your skin. Wait. See if your skin starts to itch or turn red.

Then take a deep smell off it. Then rub it on your tongue just once. Then wait.

Then eat a very, very small piece. Wait until it's all the way through your stomach and everything else.

If any of those things hurt you or give you an itch, the mushroom is poison. Don't eat it. Eating poison will only make things worse.

It's good advice. Taking things slow. Do only as much as you can handle. The way to tell if you're bringing poison into yourself, the only way to really know, is to poison yourself a little. Only a tiny bit. That way you can still recover.

Part of the advice here is hidden in the slowness. They figure if you can wait, maybe you'll come across something better. Safer. If you spend three days testing out a mushroom, if that keeps you busy enough for three days that you don't eat the mushroom, you might just find your way to regular food in the meantime.

Just remember. It's the easiest thing in the world to know what to do if you're ever starving someday. And the hardest thing in the world to hold a firm, bright mouthful of berries in your hand while hunger begs.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bolt,

With running, I always thought it might get to where a mile seemed like nothing. If you run thousands, one would be tiny.

It gets easier, the one mile. After the thousand. The one mile takes less out of you.

But a mile always feels like a mile.

Weights are the same. It's easier to pick up the big plates. But it never feels like nothing. It's always heavy. You just go in one day and it's still as heavy, but your arm can pick it up. There's something new inside your body, and it picks up the weight.

Days are that way too. They always feel like a whole day. You can do it. But like a mile, they're always long. Like a weight, always heavy. Like a day, you've done it before. Thousands and thousands.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hit and Run,

I went out to my car one morning and someone had hit it. The person who hit it left a note with a phone number under my windshield wiper. Her name wasn't Pam, but it was a thing like Pam and I'll pretend her name was Pam.

In the note, Pam said she had to run off to work, and she didn't know whose car she hit, but to call. I did, and Pam said she was sorry and asked if she could send me a check.

I really didn't know how much it cost to fix, but the dent from Pam wasn't too bad, so we agreed on a number. She sent me the check, and when I went to cash it everything was fine. But a week later I get a letter from the bank with the check inside it, cancelled.

I was pretty mad. I called Pam, but I never got to talk to her again. Before too long she must have changed numbers because when I punched in her number, it started going to that really awful noise for when there's no number whenever I called.

I thought about how to try and get back at Pam, but nothing I thought of seemed very good. I didn't even know who she was.

The worst part is, now if someone else comes along and hits my car on accident, I won't know if I believe her. I'll have to say, Sorry, but this same thing happened to me before with this other lady and it turned out really bad.

Best,
Pete

Dear Morning Zoo,

Living alone, I got to be a fan of talk radio. I know those guys can't hear me, but I can hear them. And after a while, I don't know, it's like you know them.

There was this one show that was on six hours a day starting at four-thirty in the morning. I don't know who else listened that early, but I heard that show once and then I got up earlier and earlier until I figured out when it started. One morning I got up at four-fifteen and it wasn't on yet. It was like everything was wrong, a different world for fifteen minutes.

Up that early, I had plenty of time to do all my stuff. I would lie in bed for a while, especially in the winter when it was cold and it felt so good to stay. Then I would get up and take a long shower. I bought one of those radios that plays in the shower. I had radios all over. I didn't want to be too loud to the neighbor apartments. I would switch on the different radios when I went from the bedroom to the shower, and then from the shower to the kitchen where I would start water boiling. All the radios were set to the same station. The only time I had to go without my show was from the front door to the car. Even for that, I got a little pocket radio, which was nice because I could take walks too.

I walked one morning and I thought, What if my show goes off the air? I mean, there were other shows, but this one was my favorite.

I taped the shows, after I thought about that, the first 90 minutes anyway because that's as long as tapes go. I could have taped more, but I wanted 90 minutes of a bunch of different shows instead of one whole show. There were a couple times when I knew someone special was going to be on, and I would put blank tapes in two different radios. I'd start recording on one, then, when it was an hour and a half, switch to the other one. I had a whole box of these tapes, and I tried to label them, but sometimes I got in a hurry.

The nice part of radio friends is you can still do all that stuff you want to do. I don't think very many friends would want to get up with me at four in the morning and follow me around the house and maybe go for a walk. Not many friends want to wake up just to stay in bed. But that's how radio is your friend. It'll do all that, plus do the talking.

Best,
Pete

Dear Poison Tester,

It's been so long since someone held a wooden spoon, held it out in front with a hand underneath to catch drips, and moved it towards my mouth and said, Try this. You'll love it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Playing the Ponies,

I'll make a bet with a girl just to talk to her. Even a dumb one. Like I'll bet that she can't beat me at HORSE, and she'll beat the holy shit out of me at HORSE because I'm not good at basketball. Not even a little good.

When I bet you ten bucks it would snow so much we wouldn't have to work the next day, I kind of thought I would lose. We never get to stay home from work for snow. Ever.

So the next morning, when I had to give you the ten bucks, I wasn't surprised that you didn't want to take it. But I was a little surprised that you grabbed my arm and tried to stuff the bill back in my closed fist. Your hand hard on my wrist. My wrist, my hand pulled in close to your body.

I wasn't surprised when you stuck the bill in my mailbox. But I was surprised after I put it in an envelope and taped it to the door handle on your car that you took the ten dollar bill and stuffed it in a pamphlet about gambling addiction and left it on my desk.

Where did you get that thing anyway?

I don't know if you'll be surprised or not, but tonight I put the ten in a huge box and it's getting mailed to your house. I had to leave work early to get to the post office. Worth it.

Whatever you do next, it was already worth it. I won the bet. Except the snow part.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jolene Camel,

The dumbest thing I ever did for a girl was to try and get her to stop cigarettes.

I don't really mind smoking all that much. I don't mind someone else doing it at all.

But she was bad at it. When she would exhale, she would exhale so hard, like she didn't trust the smoke would find its own way out of her. Same thing when she inhaled, but reverse. She pushed and pulled, it was like watching a breathing machine at the hospital smoke a cigarette.

I told her that she had to stop. That if she didn't, I'd smoke two cigarettes for every one of hers. She wasn't smoking that much, but two for one meant I was smoking a whole hell of a lot more than I was used to. Which was not at all.

This is what you might call trying to rescue someone.

In every other thing of life, like a kidnapped princess or someone from a building with fire in it, rescuing is good. But when it's just you and a girl you like, it's bad because you won't ever get to stop. It's not the one time and then she stops falling into traps set by monsters who kidnap her, or it's just the one time and then she stops pursuing the riches guarded by a cyclops.

She'll keep doing different stuff, and then before you know it you're too tired to even rescue her a little, and then you get mad because you want her to do the saving once in a while. Maybe you fall into a crevice or get surrounded by snakes or something. But she's always too busy, stuck in a quicksand hole. You're always on your own.

I said a lot about how my girlfriend was bad at smoking. But I'm not very good at smoking either. I have to press the coughs back down my throat. When I go to bed and wake up in the morning, the cigarette taste doesn't go away at all. It gets worse overnight, but then the really tricky thing is you can make it go away because you can smoke again, and then it's fresh cigarette smell, which you don't mind anymore.

She quit for a while. While we were together, anyway. She might have restarted. I don't know.

Best,
Pete

Dear Rembrandt,

When we repainted the bathroom, you painted one of your hairs into the wall. It's stuck there, underneath a layer of paint so thin it's hard to tell if the hair is under the paint or on top.

It has to be yours. My hair wasn't that long when we painted. It has to be yours, and I see it almost every day. Right next to the mirror.

Best,
Pete

Dear Stranger In The Candy Aisle,

I used to have a sweet tooth.

Kid me used to figure the best part about being a grownup was that you could go to the store and buy a hundred Butterfingers if you wanted.

My place would be a candy palace where I would get home, lock the door, and sit and eat candy and play Nintendo all I wanted. Adults didn't have to eat shitty squash or share Nintendo with their brothers.

Now my sweet tooth is gone. I can't eat a whole one of anything or a whole box or a bag of something without feeling sick. Candy gets me fast and sweaty, but also like I can't move.

I wonder if you have a sweet tooth. I kind of like people who do.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cheerful,

When you called in sick for work tonight, I crossed your name off the schedule.

When you're not here, I sit at my desk and watch people drive into the parking lot, count how many pull in on the wrong side of the little cement island. All night.

Best,
Pete

Dear Stumbler,

There was that time I ran into you in Target and you kind of stumbled around in your words.

You said,

I'm just buying some underwear and some workout pants. Want to see?

And then you stopped and said, I mean the pants. Not the underwear.

I didn't think you would show me the underwear. Even before you said it that way.

But after you said it that way, I was definitely thinking about the underwear.

Best,

Pete

Dear Scribe,

This author said that his biggest problem with books is that he would write them, then he would start to really like the characters. These guys he made up, he would like them so much that he didn't want anything bad to happen to them. He said he had to stop himself because being nice to all these characters made for real boring books. Nothing bad happened, even when it should have.

When you don't care about someone, it's okay for them to have bad times.

That story. The one where you threw up on the airplane. I loved that story. It sounded horrible, and I bet you felt really bad and sick and like you just wanted to get off. It was so funny, though. The part with trying to open the sick bag. The part where you hoped nobody knew. The part where you heard a guy in the row behind you say, "I think that lady just barfed her whole skeleton out, huh?"

I really loved that story.

It's a good thing that the story happened so long before. It wouldn't be as funny if I knew you and cared about you already when it happened.

Best,
Pete

Dear Primer,

Your food gave me the worst gas. Most nights when I left your place it was because my stomach hurt so bad that I thought maybe I was going to vomit.

I would get in the car, and then it was like when someone puts that tire pressure thing on a tire and you can hear the pressure draining out steady.

I would have gas the whole way home. All four windows down, flat out through the neighborhood to keep air moving. I'd get home and my stomach felt okay. And then I wanted to come back to your house.

Since then I grew up and I can just use someone's bathroom when that happens. Maybe not on the first date or something, but almost right away.

I'm trying to explain how desperate gas on the toilet is what romantic me looks like. Romantic me is hard to explain.

Best,
Pete

Dear Personal Trainer,

One of those first nights, I don't remember which one, but one of the first nights we talked on the phone, we went on so long that when we hung up it took a lot to unbend my arm, and when I looked in the mirror, my ear was dark red.

My arm was so sore the next day and the day after that. Every time I picked something up, even if it didn't weigh hardly anything, my bicep stung and the muscle would go sour.

It hurt. Every time I used my right arm that day. My body still thinking about you even after I wasn't.

Best,
Pete

Dear Switcheroo,

When I was going in for my first appointment, the orthodontist asked me, "What is your goal for your teeth?"

My teeth, they got worse before they got better. They were almost worthless to me. If I ever see a bowl of oatmeal again I'll be forced to smash it against the wall and weep on the floor. But I had some help, and I trusted somebody to fix them right, and now they're getting better.

I'm not asking you to do everything. Just help me. Help me remember that I'm doing the best thing, and that when everything is lined up, and when I can live with somebody and sleep in the same bed with somebody every night and miss them a whole lot when they go away, that I'll be happy. Help me because the reason I'm not happy now is because things have been lined up wrong since I was little and it's the only thing I know. I'm scared because I always worry that things could get worse. That even after it's kind of over, I still have to remember to wear my retainer and be good.

We can put braces on all the parts of me. We can put them on my body to make it more how you like it to be. And we can put them on my eyes so they won't look at people that aren't you. And we can put them on my arms until they bend a little and learn the right way to hold you, until it's the only way they know how to be. Everything. Wires and screws and springs and all of this, it can make me work right.

When I was going in for my first appointment, the orthodontist asked me, "What is your goal for your teeth?" They ask that because they want to know what you're thinking, and they want to know you're in the right mindset, and because sometimes people want things that aren't realistic. I made a joke and said that I wanted to have a good six months where I was done with braces and not bald yet. But in my heart, I knew what I wanted. I wanted my teeth to be something that I didn't think about all day, every day. Something that didn't hurt as much.

If you asked me that same question about us, what was my goal, I would say the same thing. I would probably start with a joke again because I'm not so great at serious stuff. But then I would say that I wanted to be the best version of myself we could make out of the raw material. Whatever arrangement we could make of the pieces of me as they've grown in and changed and eroded and been broken by other people or because I wasn't careful, with all that, I want to be the best version we can make from what's left. For you.

Sweetheart, will you be my orthodontist?

Best,
Pete

Dear Incognito,

That time we were on the train and those people asked if we were married.

I think they asked because we looked happy. The way a couple is the first month of dating.

Do you think the first month isn't real? Or is it more the months after that?

Best,

Pete

Dear Conservator,

I know how much you loved pottery. That's probably why I read this whole article about this guy who fixes broken pottery. At museums and even once a palace.

He had a lot to say, things I had no idea about, how sometimes he would find out things were restored way in the past, or sometimes he would find out that a vase was cobbled together from five different vases. He was like a detective, this guy.

One difficult case, the only way to figure out how the broken pieces went back together was to look at the grooves on the inside of the pot. The pattern on the outside was too damaged.

What's different with this guy, what makes him so special with how he restores pottery is two things.

One, he on purpose uses adhesives and parts that can be easily taken apart. That way, the next pottery restoration guy who comes along in four-hundred years, it's easier for him to fix something.

The second thing he does different, sometimes he'll talk to the museum and they'll decide to make repairs that don't cover all the cracks. That way the damage and time become part of the piece, the piece it is today.

He says that people accept historical flaws more today than they used to. That people are more used to it now.

I hope that's true.

Best,
Pete

Dear Purple,

The time you asked me my favorite color.

How I said that was a stupid question.

It is stupid. A favorite color is like a favorite kind of pants. It depends. Jeans are good for most things, but not for a funeral. Green is a good color, but I don't want to write with green pen.

It was stupider to say favorite colors were stupid than it was to pick a favorite and then ask about yours.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ebert,

Thanks for agreeing that the end of Beauty and the Beast is dumb. I thought so. I mean, there must be bad parts about being a beast. Cutting your nails with dog nail clippers. Stuff like that. But there are a lot of good things. The Beast wasn't bad looking. He had a dog face, but a smart dog where you're always telling your friends that he knows when you're sad. The Beast could beat up wolves because he was so strong. He climbed up a castle wall. He was a superhero.

Then there's magic and he turns into a guy. Just a normal guy. I guess he had a pretty face. I don't know. I was kind of used to his beast face by then.

What you said, about how it was better when he was The Beast because he was strong, but also because he was gentle? I never thought about that.

I never thought about how nice it can be to be strong and then show how you can stop being so strong. How nice it can be for someone to not do something.

Best,
Pete

Dear Clandestine,

One time I bought secret message pens for us. They wrote in invisible ink, and then each pen had a little blue light bulb that you could shine on the ink to make it show up.

I couldn't think of anything secret to write you, anything that could be a secret for us and nobody else. I didn't want to tell you anything that secret.

I guess we weren't at the secret pen stage yet.

Best,
Pete

Dear DJ,

That mix CD I gave you.

I put the songs in order to convince you to like me.

The next time we got in your car and your stereo was set to shuffle, I worried you'd listened to it all out of order already.

If that's why you didn't fall in love with me forever, because all the songs I gave you played out of order, I wonder if you would try it again?

Best,
Pete

Dear Sucker,

My favorite coffee place stayed secret for a long time. It sounds stupid now, but I couldn't take you there right off because I wasn't ready to share. It was my place.

We got drinks, and then I took out my pen and showed you how to poke a little hole in the lid so the coffee would come out better.

Nobody can claim they invented that trick. I don't anyway. Almost everyone knows it.

I saw you do it since then. On your own. The first few times, you'd pull out a pen and look at me and smile, like saying, "Thanks for showing me."

Then you would ask for my pen and poke the hole without stopping whatever you were saying. That was okay too. It was comfortable. You didn't think about it as my trick anymore. It was our trick.

Then you told me that a guy at your work noticed. That he asked you about it. That he said it was really cool and asked you to show him how to do it.

We got in a fight then. Remember that? I said something about how the guy was playing dumb to talk to you. I said that everyone knows that trick already.

You said how you didn't know that trick. You said that you weren't dumb.

We fought for a long time. The bad way. The bad way where we only said a couple things to each other and then slept really bad and woke up the next morning almost like we drank too much and couldn't leave the house the next day. Fight hungover.

I don't know why that argument sticks in my head so bad. I want to say what I meant, though, because I've thought about it a lot.

What I meant was, Please, I trust you, but be careful because you're pretty and nice and other men will want to talk with you, and I know you like me but I just get scared sometimes because there are a lot of good looking men who are really nice. So I guess what I'm asking for is just a little something, like if maybe you could tell me he had bad breath or if you could just lie and say he was an old man or something.

Just say something so I can feel like him trying that hard to talk to you doesn't mean you miss the times when I was trying that hard to talk to you, and to impress you with my favorite coffee place, and show you how smart I was poking a hole into a coffee lid.

Best,
Pete

Dear Revelation,

It was always hard for me that whenever you were dressed nice it meant that I could see your skin. The skin between your neck and your breasts. It was so soft. The skin they make bubble bath commercials for.

I didn't want people at the restaurant to see. They didn't know all the other stuff about you. What your initials looked like carved into the bowl you threw on the potter's wheel. How your cheeks would warm up so hot when you were crying that I'd hold an ice pack on your face because you said it felt good. They didn't know anything but how your skin looked. I wanted that for just me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Guide,

It was never a sure thing that we'd make it out of your dad's garage after he sent us in there to get a screwdriver.

I didn't know if I'd make it the whole weekend with your family. I was glad to come out to the garage with you. Be with you and only with you for just how long it took to find a screwdriver.

There was so much stuff in the garage. The tall shelves stuffed with flower pots and buckets. The stacks of newspapers. Something I was going to ask if it was a giant fake pumpkin.

We walked this slim deer trail of bare cement through all this junk, and then the garage light clicked off.

I figured we were stuck in there for sure. All this stuff, this dad stuff, all over, all around us in the dark.

You stood behind me, and you put your hands on my shoulders. And you pushed. You walked us both out of there like it was nothing, the same way you must have walked out of that garage and the same stuff in that garage all growing up.

When you got us out, I knew you'd be able to take me through the weekend with your parents, and then the plane ride home, and then the airport parking lot where I always get lost. When you put your hands on me, I knew that we'd make it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ballpark,

How you used to talk pottery. I'm not going to lie, I didn't care about pottery. I did it in school some. Mostly I liked that class because we could wear headphones and because all the stoned kids were in there. Those kids were easy to get along with. It would be a lie to say I took the class because I had any interest in the ceramic arts, though.

When you would talk about pottery, you made me care. Things like glazes and wax resists and the difference between cone 10 and cone 5 didn't mean a whole lot. But you talked me through it, and you brought home such nice things. Even the cookie jar with the lid that didn't fit right. It didn't matter to me because you told me about it, how if the lid and the jar don't get in the same kiln they won't heat up the same way, so maybe the lid shrinks more and the jar stays big and when they come out of their separate ovens the lid doesn't fit. I cared about that. And when we went to the clay store and you showed me some of the different kinds of clay, I cared about how they turned out after you made them into things with your hands.

You explained things to me slow so I could understand. You would tell me about throwing on the wheel and hold your hands up like you were doing it right then.

That once, you put your hands around my hands and then squeezed and kneaded to show me what you were talking about. Made my hands the clay while your lips made the words.

I cared because you made my hands the clay. Your hands squeezed and shaped my fingers the way you touched something you loved.

Best,
Pete

Dear Millionaire,

When I was a kid, I used to take these big pieces of paper and draw plans for the mansion I'd live in someday. Not plans. That makes it sound official and careful. Like they had measurements. I did drawings of big houses with waterslides and ball pits and huge video game rooms and satellite dishes and a launchpad for spaceships.

They always had to be on extra big pieces of paper. I had too many ideas to fit on regular paper.

There was always a candy room, but there wasn't ever a living room.

There was a McDonald's and a pizza place inside, but never a kitchen.

There was always a bunch of trap doors and secret passageways, but there wasn't ever a bathroom.

There was always a moat and a drawbridge and all kinds of stuff to keep everyone else out, never a front door.

If I had to do a drawing like that today, it would look different. It would still have some of the same stuff. Who doesn't want to have their very own movie theater or robot butler at their house? But there would be other stuff too.

I would draw a pottery studio for you. It might not be as big as the arcade room, but that's only because I don't really know all the stuff that goes in a pottery room.

I'd draw an empty block so we could cut your bedroom out of your house where you live now and move it to my house because you're always saying how much you like that room.

The hard part would be the rooms where we would spend time together, both of us in there at the same time. I don't know what those rooms would look like.

Maybe the laser tag room would be a good place to start. I feel like we could agree on the laser tag room.

Best,
Pete

Dear Col. Mustard,

I'm used to losing games. Losing to you was different.

Most of the time when we played, you would sit so close to me that I would have to work hard so I didn't see your cards. There was that one game of slapjack that didn't work because we were holding hands and trying to hold cards and trying to slap the jack at the same time. I put down a jack without slapping it. You set down your cards and kissed me, kissed me long and then bit your lip. All that before you slapped the jack and scuttled the pile over to your side.

Maybe that was you giving me a shot to win. Maybe you'd already decided to kiss me and it didn't matter which card went down next. Either way, it was a fine way to lose a game of cards.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sated,

I didn't mind that you always left an almost full mug of tea on the coffee table every night before you went to bed. When I heard the teapot, I knew it was time to come into the living room and hold onto you and touch your hair because before your tea was cold you would be ready to sleep.

Best,
Pete

Dear Shoe Lover,

Mostly shoes never mattered to me. They're just shoes.

The only ones that were different were the Air Jordans my dad bought. The original white high tops with the red trim and the silhouette of Michael Jordan dunking.

When I saw those shoes, I don't think I ever wanted a pair of shoes so bad in my life. They were so cool. And being a little kid, I was sure that when a person put those shoes on, he would be way better at basketball than someone wearing store brand tennis shoes with the wrong number of stripes on the sides.

I asked my dad if I could have his Air Jordans when he died. I really thought that these shoes would be the thing I wanted when he was gone. He had a house and two cars. He even had a ski condo. All I wanted was those Air Jordans.

They sat in his closet most of the time. I knew because I would sneak in there to look at them. I got in the habit of trying them on to see if I'd grown into them yet. My shoes DO feel a little tight today. Then I'd take a quick sneak down the hallway.

His closet. It was always dark. I left the lights off when I went in his bedroom. I wasn't supposed to be in there, and the moan of the closet door on its tracks was so loud in all that dark and stillness.

My dad's Air Jordans were way too big. Twice my size. Even with ski socks on. Even with regular socks on and then ski socks over top of them.

I hadn't thought about those shoes in years. Not until we were at the shoe store and it was taking you forever to look at shoes. Looking at shoes is the worst. I hate how the shoe store makes you tell a guy your size and then he goes into a back room and comes back and stands there while you put on the shoe. If it doesn't fit, you have to do the same thing again. It's too much.

I saw some high tops when I was looking around, waiting for you. They weren't Air Jordans, but they reminded me how my dad's Air Jordans looked. How they looked every time I opened the closet and put them on and was scared that my dad would walk in and see me trying on his shoes. How I thought he would know that putting on those shoes, I was putting them on so I could walk over his grave. Slam dunk over his grave. How most of me knew that special shoes wouldn't change most of what was bad about me, but how part of me thought that maybe the right shoes, the perfect just right shoes, would make things a little better for just a little bit.

I'm going to try to be extra patient while you look at shoes.

Best,
Pete

Dear Nervous Flyer,

It didn't worry me that you held a stranger's hand on the airplane when you flew alone. I know it was because you were scared.

Okay, it made me a little bit worried. Not because of you. It made me a little bit worried because I knew how nice it was to hold your hand. Especially when your long fingers pulled together tight.

We should have flown together. Just once.

I didn't want you to be scared. But it might have been worth it. So you would hold my hand like you held that guy's hand.

Best,
Pete

Dear Player,

You didn't know it, but we played a game when you stayed over. The game was to see who would get out of bed last. Like a backwards race.

Best,
Pete

Dear Skinny Dipper,

That time we broke into the pool and we got in with our underwear on.

You in your underwear, then me in my boxer briefs that I bought when we started dating to replace all the ones with holes and loose elastic. You in your underwear that always looked like it was yours and nobody else could wear it. That part was great.

Your lips, your neck. I wanted those things. Those parts of you.

But I didn't want to be in the pool with you and me in underwear. Your lips and your neck were right there, and all I could think about was the wet drive home. The part after we kissed and the underwear, the cold part where we'd both be in our own seats that don't touch each other. My cold body and your cold body all the way apart from each other.

All my stuff, the stuff in my underwear and the other stuff too, all of me was too old for swimming in fenced pools by the time you came along and offered. All my parts took too long to get warm again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Road Trip Buddy,

Whatever you do, don't put me in charge of the camera. There won't be any pictures of the waterfall hike or the weird little gas station in New Mexico. Even that long stretch of desert road, the one that made me admit after hours and hours that parts of the desert are okay to look at, even that won't show up when we go to look at my pictures.

It'll just be you.

You. Tired and breathing hard at the top of a waterfall.

The waterfall's there, off to the side, somewhere out of the frame that's filled with your face, your good side.

You pumping the gas and posing with the car at the weird little gas station in New Mexico.

You behind the wheel, smiling at the piece of desert road that changed my mind.

I don't think I'll forget what all that stuff looked like. And if I forget a gas station, oh well. But if I forget what you looked like at the gas station?

Best,
Pete

Dear Little Spoon,

I spooned with people before we met. But when I started to hold you, you were the first person who ever pushed back against me. It made it feel like you really wanted someone to hold you. That you weren't just sleeping in a bed that someone else was in too.

Best,
Pete

Dear Blackout,

It takes time to get settled when the power's out. Even after it's been dead long enough to worry about what's in the fridge, long enough to peek inside even though that lets the cold out. Even after long enough that I've peeked twice, I'll click the light switches when I walk in a room. Crash into furniture when the light doesn't click on.

My favorite was the nights we spent together. A candle. Ice cream we had no choice but to finish. My favorite were nights with you where I wouldn't even notice dead switches and sockets.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bandit,

That time when you held a banana upside-down and like a gun, when you jammed the gun into my side and you said, Stick 'em up, and then you made me give you my wallet and used the money to call for pizza.

You always said I wasn't very good at asking for what I needed. I needed that robbery. At bananapoint.

Best,
Pete

Dear Marked,

I'm sorry I ruined the dinner table at your family's house the time I cooked us dinner. I didn't think. I didn't know the hot pan would make those weird white marks on the table when I set it down.

Your parents were really nice about it, but I saw how your dad scratched at the white marks. Your mom said she wanted to get a new table anyway. That was nice of her.

Best,
Pete

Dear Painted Lady,

The thing I didn't like about your tattoos is that I wanted to see your skin. I liked your skin.

One time I read this thing where a writer said he had really bad writer's block because he fell in love with how beautiful a blank piece of paper was. How he didn't want to ruin it when he put a pen on it.

So maybe it was a good thing that you had those tattoos. So I could touch your skin like I did.

Best,
Pete

Dear Unfinished,

My favorite picture of you is from before we even knew each other. It's by my bed. It's framed.
There's something I like better about you from before you knew me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Apollo,

I would like very much to visit the moon.

There are lots of nice places here, don't get me wrong. It's hard to tell if the moon will be pretty when you're standing on it. It might be ugly. But I'd still like to try.

One time I went to the desert, and it was really pretty, and then when I got back I told you about it. But the words weren't any good. I couldn't say how it looked. I couldn't make it feel like we saw the same thing. All the stuff I could think to say, it didn't make it so all the dirt and wrinkled rocks were pretty. All the stuff I could think to say, it didn't make you close your eyes and be there with me. The long line of phone poles swooping out to nowhere. How the sun squinted into a long line when it dipped down.

If I went to the moon, I could point. The moon would be there like always, even better than the sun because it doesn't mind if you look right at it. When I pointed and told you about the moon, you would understand.

The best part of a moon trip would be that I wouldn't have to worry about the right words to tell you.

When I go anywhere else pretty, it's all I think about.

Best,
Pete

Dear Future You,

When you get older it's hard to smell things. Everyone knows it's harder to see and hear, but also you can't feel things like you used to and you can't taste things right either.

That's why old ladies wear so much perfume. Ladies wear perfumes their whole life, and then they get old and keep wearing perfume. To smell it like they did before, they have to really dump it on.

If we get old, will you remember and put on however much perfume you put on now? I really like how you smell now. If I'm old too I won't be able to smell anything. I just want to know that smell, the way you smell now, I just want to know it still exists.

Best,
Pete

Dear Complimentary,

Do you remember when we were in the bookstore, and then you stopped me in the middle of it.
And you said, "I can't wait until your book is in here"?

You were always trying to make me feel good about myself.
That one worked.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cohabitant,

What it would be like if you lived here. That's what I think about.

When I brushed my teeth this morning, I leaned over to see in the bedroom. Where you would sleep.

At night I washed my dishes and thought how there's plenty of time to wash twice as many.

I thought about coming home and how you would stand up from the couch to hug me, and I would smell your hair and then I'd be okay.

All that sounded pretty good.

I'm sure there are bad parts I'm not thinking about. Maybe when I looked in from brushing my teeth you would be up and mad because we had a fight the night before, and I'd have to worry about if we would fight again before I went to work. Maybe when I did dishes you would talk really loud with your sister on the phone and I would be mad because I wanted you to help me. And maybe when I came home from work you would stay on the couch. You would say hi from where you sat.

The thing is, I have to guess about the parts that would be bad. Make stuff up. I don't have to guess about the good parts. I'm sure about the parts I would like.

Best,
Pete

Dear Concussed,

When you told me that you hit your head one time and it took you almost a whole day to wake up, and how it made you afraid to go to sleep because you did that one time and didn't wake up, it made a lot of sense how you didn't sleep.

All the staying up late and calls and the vacuum out so late, all that made a lot more sense. I thought maybe it was drugs, but it wasn't drugs.

Did you get jealous when I would go to sleep? It's okay if you did. I wouldn't blame you.

Sometimes you woke me up a lot, though. And even when you were in the bed with me, I couldn't sleep right with the light on. And sometimes when you would just fall asleep when we were going somewhere in the car, I didn't know if I should wake you up so you wouldn't be scared anymore or let you sleep because you needed to sleep so bad that you couldn't even stop yourself.

It must be really hard to be so scared of something that you have to do for a third of your life.

Best,
Pete

Dear Shortcut,

I was never good at soccer. Or basketball. Or baseball. Baseball was downright goddamn embarrassing.

The one thing I could do good as anybody was jump fences.

Every fence, every one I saw, I could climb. And did climb.

It's easy for a boy. My sneakers fit right into the holes on chain-link. It was hard to imagine that chain-link was invented for anything besides the toes of boys' sneakers.

Getting bigger, my toes didn't fit anymore, but I didn't need them to.

I climbed into the college stadium and ran around the track, flopped on the pole vault mats. I climbed backstops. Waist-high fences, those would just be hands on top, a quick vault over. Taller 6-footers were just as easy. A few quick steps, hands on the top rail, bounce my feet off the middle of the fence and then throw myself over the other side. It could get tricky if you didn't look at what was on the other side, but landing wasn't really the point. The ground wasn't ever the fun part when you jumped a fence.

Wrought iron fences with spikes on the top. White plastic fencing that bent under me when I got up on top. Concrete slab. A discus cage. It didn't matter why the fence was there, what it was supposed to keep me out of.

I wouldn't be much good at catch. Showing a kid how to throw a nice, tight spiral. He'd never learn from me which part of the foot is the part for kicking soccer balls. There isn't a lot I could pass on to a kid, as sports go.

But I'll tell you this right now. There isn't a man alive who could build a fence to hold that kid. Or convince him that the high jump mats and their cool, rough covers weren't made for him to lay on at night.

Best,
Pete

Dear Frigid,

There was a manager at the hamburger place where I used to work that would always yell at employees in the walk-in freezer. He was nice most of the time, but sometimes people had to be yelled at. It's a hamburger place. Stuff happened.

He told me he took the yelling to the freezer because when you start being mad at someone and tell them about it, it's easy to just go on and on. If you're inside the walk-in freezer, it can only go so long before you get cold, before the freezer is in your fingers and then your wrists and then your nose, your lips, your whole face.

Me and you should have moved somewhere cold. Somewhere really cold. Somewhere so cold that when you were talking to me and telling me all the things that I didn't do right for you, I would see your breath roll out of your mouth in big carpets of smoke, watch your words in the air spread apart and disappear up above your head. Somewhere so cold that there'd be no time to dance around what we needed to say. The times you said too much backstory, your fingers would hurt for days after. The times I made excuses for everything, a black spot would grow on my cheek where a little patch of skin had died.

We could work it out before anything really serious happened. Before frost bit our fingers and toes. Before we'd get to where someone would ask about my missing finger and I'd have to say,

Oh, you know, same old fight about holidays with her mom.

We'd keep it short, then we'd go back inside and stand close together to help each other warm up. It might take a while to warm up again, but that's okay. That's just making your body the same as your feelings, taking a little while to warm up. But you always know you'll get there again. It won't stay cold forever.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bedecked,

I wish you would have told me that you were expecting to unwrap a necklace or a ring. I didn't know.

That clay wedging table I made took things out of me. And I had to do it in my apartment. Saw lumber in my apartment. Drill hardwood in my apartment. I even poured the plaster for the tabletop in my bedroom. All of it to make you something.

I thought you would like it better than something a stranger made. That you'd like it better because it took so much out of me, and that I breathed in plaster dust and sawdust and the smells and all of it. I thought you would like that part of that table was in me now too, in the spots where I gave something up.

Sometimes I think I should have bought you jewelry because that would have made you happy.

But anyone can buy a ring. Most people don't have the guts to pour plaster over carpet in an apartment. To hold your breath as long as you can. Hope for the best.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleepover Woman,

Thanks for the stuffed bear and the stuffed Super Mario in sex poses. The way you left them there mid-fuck for me to find when I got home.

People expect a lot of things from a lover when they come home. Nobody expects Super Mario masturbating a bear.

Best,
Pete

Dear Plus One,

Thanks for being my date to the wedding.

Whenever you said, If we ever get married...

It wasn't that I didn't like you. I just didn't think I could get married to somebody. Even if we got to where it looked like a good idea, I always thought I couldn't stand in front of all those people and say stuff to somebody and kiss and cut cake and smile for pictures while everyone watched, it was just too much. I liked you. But it wasn't important to me that anyone else knew about it.

Part of you knew, huh? Is that why, when we walked out to the car to get your jacket, is that why you asked me to kiss you before we went back inside? Because you knew I was embarrassed to even kiss in someone else's rented canopy, even when everyone was watching someone else and not us?

Now I kind of get it. It's not supposed to be about whether I can marry somebody and do all that stuff with somebody. It's about if I could do it with you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ringer,

Here's what was funny about the way it was to be with you.

If I bought someone a ring, someone who's not you, I would be really worried about picking the right one. I don't want to buy someone a ring if she would have to pretend to like it. You have to wear those things all the time.

If I bought you a ring, I know you would have liked it no matter what because it wouldn't matter to you.

The funny part is how it would have been so much harder to pick one out knowing that you would wear anything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Guest Number Two,

The door in this hotel room has a closer arm on the top. Right when the arm closed the door behind me, all I wanted was to go home.

I never want to go anywhere. How much you liked hotels helped me like going somewhere.

I miss how you swiped hotel coffee, even from that hole in New Mexico where the carpet in the hallways wasn't stapled down.

How you snagged all of the little soaps and shampoos and took them home too. From that hell pit in the mountains that wasn't even close to water but they still had handsoaps molded into seashell shapes.

I liked how you always wanted to have sex right when we got into the room. Even at that dump where the doors had big enough gaps underneath that you could fit your whole hand through.

The bed is always different, and the easy chair smells like chemical acid. I always get hungry at midnight.

I used to lay down with you and hold onto you, and even though you went to sleep way before I did I could hang on and then it was okay. You smelled the same. You pressed heat into me the same when you fell asleep.

Now I'm afraid to turn off the TV because then it'll be too quiet in here. I can't even turn it off long enough to write this letter, so I'm sorry if it sounds a little weird. The remote is glued down to the nightstand in this shitpile. I need you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Minor Thief,

It was really sweet how you would pack up all the little bags of hotel coffee to bring home for your stepdad. All the soap and the shampoo and stuff, you left all that alone, but the coffee bags disappeared first thing. Even if they were just Folgers or the kind where the bag just said Coffee.

It was sweet for your stepdad, and it was sweet for me. I didn't drink hotel coffee even once in all those years.

Best,
Pete

Dear Chef,

Doing dishes while you got ready for bed was one of my favorites. I know that sounds stupid. But on the nights you made dinner I didn't get to help much. Like the time you made stuffed peppers and potatoes.

You started before I got home, and I didn't know anything about what happened in the kitchen.

When I came home, everything was almost done, and you had music on, and it was my music, and I didn't know if you picked it because it's what you wanted to listen to or because you knew I would open the door soon.

It was later, when I did the dishes, that's when I could tell a lot about what happened. I saw grated cheese on the counter, and when I cleaned off the grater and put it back in the drawer I saw you must have pulled out all the drawers looking for it. When I rinsed out the pot from the mashed potatoes, I could tell you made the potatoes last by the softness of the leftover mashed spuds. When I looked at your plate, I saw the patterns you made with your fork. I washed the last little bits of rice off your fork, and I knew the last thing you ate was a bite of stuffed pepper.

You were ready for bed before I could finish the dishes. There was a lot of dishes.

I wanted to do everything after dinner that night because I couldn't be there with you when you cooked. To unwind your cooking was kind of close. It made me feel like I was there. That I was there with you more of the time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Caution,

It turns out my health insurance won't pay for a vasectomy. I checked.

You would be a good mom. You're really good at picking up babies, and when you carry them around you point to things and say the words for those things. Car. Clouds. Grass. Just the way you talk to regular people, but with more words of things. Bridge. Geese. Water.

When I asked the HR lady from work about insurance for a vasectomy, I thought how it will be to get old and not have anyone around. Stairs. Wheelchair. Pneumonia.

I thought how a baby might want to grow up with money and nice things. University. Fountain pen. Maserati.

There were all these things dads have that I don't have. Ties. Vans. Beards.

I'm sorry. Apology. Regret.

Best,
Pete

Dear Synonym,

In school we had to do this thing that was supposed to teach us to use different words. They gave us a paper, and on the paper was all the stuff two people said when they were talking to each other. Every line ended with "he said" or "she said."

We were supposed to cross out "said" and replace it with something else. They gave us a list of words that you could use, things like Exclaimed or Yelled or Whispered or Declared.

Some answers were right and some were wrong. Maybe it would say, "'Let's be really quiet,' he said". You couldn't put "screamed" in there. It wouldn't make sense.

A lot of those words are dumb, though. I mean, they don't really mean anything.

I could say you Exclaimed something. But that doesn't really explain what you did. It doesn't say that when you were happy and surprised your eyes squinted almost all the way shut and you would tip forward and then backwards at the waist while you talked.

Whispered doesn't tell anyone that I could feel your breath in my ear and feel your hand on my chest.

Declared makes it sound like you were telling me about a law or something, not that you were kind and quiet and quick.

Those other words were different. But they weren't better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Historian,

My grandfather was a machine gunner on a bomber during World War II. A few years ago, someone sent me a report my grandfather filed after he was done in the war. It was called an After Action Report and in it my grandfather told all the things that happened to him.

I already heard some of the story from my dad, but I didn't know if it was true.

My dad told me that my grandfather was supposed to go on a bombing mission, and before they took off he found out his machine gun was broken. Instead of shooting one bullet after another, ratatatatat, it would only shoot one at a time, then he would have to reload it by hand and he would get one more shot. It was pretty bad. His job was to use the machine gun and keep the plane safe. He couldn't do his job.

That part was true. It said all that in the After Action Report.

In their mission they got hit, and most of the crew jumped out.

The way my dad told it, my grandpa and another guy decided to stay on the plane and try to float to Switzerland. My dad said they wanted to go there and eat chocolate and not fight anymore.

But the plane was too broken and they jumped out with parachutes, and when they landed they got captured right away.

Then my dad said a Nazi hit my grandfather in the face with the butt of his gun and knocked some of his teeth out.

He had to be in a POW camp, but it was almost the end of the war. My dad said the guards were all really old men, weren't very good at fighting and probably weren't very good at guarding either.

It wasn't too long before the good guys came and let everyone out.

When I read the report, it was almost exactly like what my dad said. My grandfather didn't say anything about how they were going to try to run away to Switzerland, but he did say that a couple of them tried to fly the plane a little further after they got hit.

My grandfather said "After a damn short discussion, we hit the silk" which meant they jumped out and used their parachutes.

I liked that part. It sounded like something out of comic books.

I don't really know much about my grandfather. I don't know which parts are true. Was he just trying to fly the plane a little longer, or was he going to try and run away?

It would be okay if he was trying to run away. That doesn't bother me.

I was thinking how it would be nice if you wrote something like that, an After Action Report, for everything that happened between us.

Everyone always says how there are two sides. I'd like to know yours. And which parts were different and if that mattered to me.

You could tell me the truth. About the end part. Whether you were trying to save something, or if you were just using the last few minutes of flames and heat and panic to try and make a getaway to somewhere better. Where there wasn't a war.

It wouldn't bother me. It's not really up to me to decide what's a good idea or not.

Best,
Pete

Dear Traveler,

Every time we went on vacation you slept closer.

In New Mexico, you curled into me and stayed.

In Chicago you laid across me, even closer.

In Portland, the furthest we went, you were almost on top of me.

The further from home we got, the closer you slept.

Near the end I wondered if maybe we should go somewhere far away. Like Alaska. I don't know if it's far enough or if there was such a thing as far enough. But maybe.

Best,

Pete

Dear At-Fault,

There's this kind of car accident called a no-fault accident. It's where the driver didn't do anything wrong or he couldn't stop it.

People from these accidents have bad problems after. The guy who drinks beers and beers and beers and then mashes a stranger with his car knows what to do. No more beers. But the guy who has a different kind of accident and picks up the pieces of a skateboard crunched under his wheel, so close to his house he could yell over and they would hear him if the door was open, that guy can't do anything. He can't stop skateboard kids from sweeping under his car. He never could.

When you slept with someone else, was it because you wanted to make sure we had a reason to break up? To be sure? So when you went back about how it went wrong, it was just about don't sleep with a guy?

It's okay if that's what happened. If that was easier. No-fault happens to a lot of drivers. They'd say you made the right choice.

Best,
Pete

Dear Flatterer,

You were the only one who ever called me handsome.

And you were the only one who never stopped.

I didn't take it right. I couldn't. My face couldn't. I shut my eyes to stop me crying. I was supposed to be driving. I was supposed to be a man. A man drives right and a man doesn't cry, he definitely doesn't cry because someone calls him handsome.

You were the only one who ever called me handsome.

I didn't know what to do.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleepyhead,

I know I used to call late.

When you slept and then woke up to answer the phone, I could always tell right away. Your sleepytown voice. It was almost like a little kid, and I would have to convince you to go back to bed. You fought me even though I'm sure you were asleep before you said goodbye.

A couple times towards the end, I called late when I knew you'd be asleep. I still liked that part of you, the cute part that would ask me how my day was and fall asleep before I could finish whatever things there were to say.

I called a lot when it was late there at the end. That sleepytown voice. I wanted to hear it just a few times more.

Best,
Pete

Dear Long Haul,

I always liked buying that cheap truck stop stuff for you. Like that shirt with the eagle on it that said New Mexico. Or the little folding knife with your name burned into the wood. Or the deck of cards that came in a little leather snap pouch with a rattlesnake on it from Arizona. Those shitty gifts always made me think about you.

That sounds awful.

Whenever we were in the car a long time you looked sad. Maybe you were tired, or maybe you didn't like that much time on the road. So I'd get that stuff. It cheered me up. I thought it might cheer you up.

I don't know if it did. You never wore your eagle shirt.

Long drives made you sad a way I didn't understand. The kind of sad that a wizard with a pet dragon in a glittery snow globe doesn't help even a little.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tattle-Tale,

I wished you didn't tell me those stories about you getting hit on. I thought you were pretty, and I told you all the time. How come you always told me how everyone else thought you were pretty too? The guy on the bus with the blue tie that matched his blue briefcase. The one I said was probably doing clown work because that's the only person who has a blue briefcase. The leafblower guy from outside your work who asked you all the time to go with him to the half-off days at the thrift store.

I got hit on sometimes too. Not very much, but a couple times when we were together. I didn't tell you because I didn't feel good when you told me about yours, so I kept mine a secret. None of mine did clown work though.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sculptor,

When you said you wanted to be with me, but you wanted me to be different, I knew what you meant. It's what I wanted too.

Best,
Pete

Dear Curtain Call,

It's too bad your parents came over in the middle of our goodbye. I almost made it without crying. I would have made it if they weren't there, I bet.

Best,
Pete

Dear Talkie,

I always hated when you talked about that guy you saw before me.

When you said all the bad things about the guy you were seeing before. Just the small, goofy stuff, like how he made you go with him to buy expensive jeans and the stores were really boring. When you told me about that guy and the jeans, I was thinking about you, sitting on a curb just like we were, telling someone the small, goofy stuff about me. About how I'd be your funny story that charmed the next guy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Absentee,

Times I miss you the most

- When I put the groceries away and it takes a long time.
- When I get home on Friday and there's the whole weekend.
- When I want to carve pumpkins.
- When I watch shows that used to be our shows and think about what you would say if we still watched them together.
- When I hit a duck with my car on accident and didn't have anyone to confess it to.
- Fall.
- When I see those claw machines you were so good at.
- When I'm done drinking.
- When I'm thinking about if I should just keep drinking.

Best,
Pete

Dear Absentee,

The times I don't miss you as much

- When I'm tired and just want the bed.
- When I leave clothes all over.
- When I drive and listen to my music.
- When I go to a party and don't worry if you're okay on the other side of the room.
- When I listen to books on tape.
- When I wake up to stay in bed and read comics.
- When I have to stay late at work and didn't expect it.
- When I sleep on the couch.

Best,
Pete

Dear Rated M,

I read a thing that says sometimes people want to do violent things in sex because it makes the sex less intimate. If I slap you in a sex way, we can keep from being too close. Close can be uncomfortable.

It's good that I didn't know. That I didn't know how that was a way to make things less close. I would have done anything to make us closer. I trusted you not to ask for my hands to take us further apart.

Best,
Pete

Dear DVD Fiend,

I never finished that movie we started.

I was kind of thinking you would come back and we would watch it together.

Did you watch the rest? Did you see the ending? It's okay if you did. If you knew we wouldn't see it together.

Best,

Pete

Dear Boxer,

I taped the box full of all the stuff you left here, but then I found some more stuff and I had to peel the tape off the box and open it up again. Then I put more stuff in the box and taped it back up. Then the same thing happened again.

You left a little bottle of lotion stuffed in the back of the closet. I didn't find it until a towel up on a high shelf pulled the lotion down with it. Right on top of my head.

There was some ice cream you left in the freezer. I know it was yours because it had fruit in it. I hate the fruit kind.

One of your shirts in my dresser drawers. Way at the bottom.

Tea. Your tea.

I found that stuff after I taped the box of all your other stuff two more times already. Open close open. Every time the new tape peeled away some more of the skin off the cardboard box.

When I found your tea, there were only a couple tea bags left in the box. Giving back a couple tea bags felt mean. Like I was trying to prove you were wiped all the way out.

It stays in the cabinet. I hope that's okay.

Best,
Pete

Dear Town Bicycle,

I didn't tell anyone you left me because I knew what would happen. Instead, I tried little projects. A new towel bar in the bathroom, a cheap garage sale bike to try and fix up.

When people find out you're alone, they feel bad for you. And then they say what you should do to get better.

One person told me I should date her friend. I'm sure her friend is really nice, but I don't think replacing you with someone else will make things okay.

Someone else said I should fuck it out of my system. She said those words. I don't really fuck people. It's okay for people to do that. I just don't think I should because those feelings are too hard for me to break apart, fucking and love.

I couldn't fix up that garage sale bike. Not even a little. It's really hard to fix a bike, especially a bike that was made cheap and has plastic handlebar grips that are molded on the handlebars, stuff like that.

I gave up on fixing it, and then I wanted to get rid of it. Everyone told me ways to get rid of it. Everyone told me to put an ad up for it or to set it out on the street, and I had to explain that it was a lot closer to being a pile of the parts of a bike than it was to being a bike.

Everyone had ideas about what to do next. But they didn't really know how rickety things were at the start.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cartographer,

How far apart things are isn't always the same.

I mean, your house was always twenty miles away. Twenty-point-one. Twenty-point-one wasn't far most times.

When I left really late at night, twenty point one was really far.

That night I got a ticket because I went through a red light, that night it was really far.

When I drove your stuff twenty point one to your house, that was the farthest twenty-point-one ever was.

Best,
Pete

Dear Wilma Shakespeare,

There's a big stack of your letters in my closet. I threw away all the envelopes you drew on, and the bookmarks you stuffed the envelopes with. I even threw away that stuff you sent me from Arizona.

I didn't throw away the letters yet. Some of them made me feel good and bad because they reminded me of what things were like. One made me mad because it was a really long one, and it was all about you. Another one too, I opened it up and there was just a page of doodles you did in class. I sent you long letters, and you sent me back doodle pages. Your tree doodles are really good, but still.

The books you left and the clothes you left and all that stuff was easy to throw away. I only felt one way about all that stuff. But the letters are hard because I feel lots of ways about the different ones, so I can't get rid of all of them or none of them. It has to be just some. Which means I have to read them all again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sisterly,

It always bothered me that you didn't love your sister.

Sometimes I don't even like my brother a little bit. We grew up together. That fucker beat me up about one hundred times and I only beat him up once.

He used my toothbrush.

I shaved my butt hair with his face razor.

Some stuff happened.

But I love him.

If you could split from your sister, just like that. If you guys didn't thread together, how would me and you?

Best,

Pete

Dear Rightful Owner,

I threw out that ice cream you bought, the kind with the fruit in it.

You were right. I wouldn't eat the fruit kind.

All the other kinds you bought, I did eat those. Except that one time. Remember that time I used the full ice cream container to ice my leg after I hurt it? I remember laughing when you asked what happened to your ice cream, and I had to tell you. It was the first time I thought about how the words would sound when they came out. How I had to tell you I wasted a whole caramel vanilla ice cream on icing my leg.

It's one of the worst things I did to you, and I laughed about it. How about that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Handy,

Came across a piece of your handwriting today. There won't ever be anything new for me to read in your handwriting. Just the words already here.

Best,
Pete

Dear Admiral,

The meaning of one bobby pin. How many have you lost in your lifetime? Seriously. I swear to Christ, if someone gathered all the orphaned bobby pins and melted them down there would be enough material to build a battleship.

I ask because I've been saving these ones you left. But it doesn't seem you're coming back for them.

Best,
Pete

Dear Snacker,

I know you had really strict rules about food. I know you liked to eat certain things at certain times and that's what made you feel good. I know that what made me feel good wasn't always what made you feel good.

It would have been nice to have midnight snacks with you. I like midnight snacks. I miss our midnight snacks even though they never happened.

Best,
Pete

Dear Joker,

That joke we had? The one where you would say, Do I have anything in my teeth? Clench your jaw, pull your lips back. That row of teeth right in my face.

I almost did that the other day. With someone else. I was about to do it when I thought how much I would hate if you did it with someone else.

Best,
Pete

Dear Recipient,

I got you the kind of gifts that are for Just Because all the time. That pair of mittens like the mailman had where the tops fold back. The piñata full of tiny boozes and hard candy.

It's just that I kept messing up, so the Just Because kind of gifts turned into the I'm Sorry kind.

I wanted to stop messing up so the picture I colored at work or the mug with the funny polar bear on it could be the Just Because kind of gift again. But I couldn't stop messing up.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ta-Da,

Every time my key goes into the lock on my front door. Every time I stand there and click the lock, that's when I think about what I want to be behind that door.

Sometimes it's easy. Cool air is the only thing if it's summer.

Sometimes it's the laundry put away instead of piled on the couch.

Sometimes it's you on the couch. Sometimes you're sitting next to the pile of laundry.

Sometimes it's not you on the couch. It's hearing you turn pages in the other room.

Sometimes it's a dog waiting for me to rub the gray parts of his muzzle.

Sometimes it's a bigger TV. Sometimes smaller.

There are a lot of different things that happen between that click and the door swinging in. Something about that door, in my head it's like how a magician reaches into his hat. You don't know what he'll pull out, but it'll be something different than what he put in.

So far, no magic. It's the same stuff I left behind. No rabbit. No big TV. No ham and potato soup in the crock pot. No you.

It's good to think about it like that. As magic. Because magic doesn't happen most of the time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Monster,

You at my place was hell.

You fell asleep first. Left me to wedge in the bed and wake you. Sometimes you'd turn over with your eyes closed. Turned over to kiss me.

Your nightmares woke me before they woke you. I'd listen to your breath, hard in, hard out, breath of the chased, last breaths through nightmares, hands tight on your throat.

I didn't know to wake you at first. Then you told me about some of your dreams, the places you tended to go and who was there with you, and when I woke up to your nightmare breaths next to me, I'd grabbed your shoulder and then touched the side of your face, your head and your hair, kept touching until you woke up.

You went back to sleep and I held on, waited for another round.

That was every night. Then there was the morning.

You woke up earlier than I did to lay on top of me, pull my arms around you different ways like trying on scarves.

If you took a shower, I would be thankful for the sleep and then wake up to you shaking me, saying, Take me to breakfast.

I would put on yesterday's clothes and wear yesterday's dirt and take you and sit on your side of the booth with you.

You would remind me that we were indoors and I could take my sunglasses off now.

Our restaurant breakfasts with names I didn't like saying out loud. Little Piggy Breakfast. Viva La France. The Flapper. Names I didn't want to say for toast and eggs.

You held the syrup high off the table, letting it drip down onto your waffle, filling just the squares you wanted, the tip of your tongue poked between your lips at the corner of your mouth.

You would hold my hand under the table. Or bring my hand to your leg and cap it with your own. We ate that way, klutzing forks around in the way of a couple amputees lucky enough to find each other.

You let me pay. Not without a fight. The math on how long you could go without filling your car's gas tank.

We would leave and maybe read books or go get something from the store to make lunch or sometimes even get back into bed and sleep again, too warm in our clothes. It felt like a mistake or a waste of the day. Felt like that then.

It was horrible when you stayed over. I remind myself.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bloodhound,

You always used to say that the smell of coffee was the smell of me.

Coffee is really important to me. Not in that way where I have bumper stickers and t-shirts that talk about Don't Bother Me Before Coffee. But it's more important to me than I thought.

Sometimes on work days it's the only thing that I like in the whole day.

Sometimes I'm late for work because I want to sit at the table and hook my legs around the table legs and finish a cup before I leave the house. If coffee is going to be the only thing I like in the whole day, I'd better do it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Timecop,

I used to play a game with life a lot where I would try to think how old I really was.

Forty is the middle. But there aren't a lot of people in my family that make it to really old. No grandmas left, no grandfathers. Figuring on anything more than sixty-five is getting a little wild. So let's say sixty-five.

Those last five-to-ten years won't be great. That brings us down to fifty-eight.

Then you have to figure from the other end. The first ten years of life you're alive, but you're not a real person. Or I wasn't anyway. Just a kid, you know. Even after that, when do kids really turn into people? Fifteen?

So we've got from fifteen to fifty-eight now. Forty-three years of good, full life when you can feel like a real person and make decisions and all that stuff.

I've been around for thirteen years of my forty-three good ones. Quarter of the way through real life.

And then some more math. How we were together for three years. Three years out of eighty is almost nothing. Four percent of real life.

Three years out of forty-three, that's more. Almost twice as much.

I do this math all the time. I do it when I'm bored somewhere and I want to figure how much life is going away. Times I'm really happy. Then I do it and hope the happy part can last a long, long time. I don't know if anything can last eighty years, but maybe forty-three. Or, I guess thirty for me now. Thirty could happen.

I do that math when I think about us. Not because I think I wasted my time. Because I don't know why it still hurts so bad.

You're seven percent. If you think about all of everything in someone's life, all that stuff. Seven percent is big.

Seven percent of my time.

But a lot more of my life.

Best,
Pete

Dear Clutter,

When you stayed over, I always knocked over your shower stuff where you set it on the edge of the tub. There were so many things, so many cream-colored bottles spread out along the ledge. When I stepped in the shower, I tried to raise my leg high like I was getting on a horse, but I'd still kick something over and it would tumble into the tub.

That pissed off me so bad. Probably because it was early. Probably because I didn't want to get up for work.

Probably because I was used to the way things were.

And even though a lot of things were better, there were still some small things that made me want the easy parts of my old life back. Like getting in the tub without kicking shit over.

Best,
Pete

Dear Salvager,

Your dog. Picked because she was weird and runty. You said weird runty dogs need love from someone.

When you were picking out a scarf, you took the one that was crumpled on the floor and had one long string sticking out of it. You said you could fix it and that it wasn't fair that someone just threw it on the floor and then no one wanted it because it was on the floor.

Your books from library book sales, the ones you took instead of the ones brand new from the bookstore.

Everything you loved, it was something that most people wouldn't want because they saw it and sort of felt like someone had gotten most of what the good out of it already.

But you took things people squeezed the last good drops from and then you squeezed more good back in. Water from a stone, then water back in.

You found the last good parts of me. The way you cut away the moldy parts on a block of cheese until you got to the clean part. Cheese from rot. Water into the stone.

You kept all the books and the scarf and your favorite jeans that were more made out of holes than out of jeans.

I'm the only one you didn't keep. I don't know what happens to stuff you don't keep.

Best,
Pete

Dear Clover,

Every morning I throw away something that you gave me. Or something you left at my house. One of the things you made for me to have at my house.

I look at the day's thing, turn it over in my hands and see new parts. The little spot where you messed up the glaze on the sugar bowl you threw on the wheel. I turn the thing around and around and say,

I don't need this anymore

and then I throw it in the garbage with the coffee grounds and crap mail.

Some things are hard. Really hard. Your blanket. Your hairbrush. Our playing cards we always brought to the diner on breakfast dates. There was a cup I took out of the trash and rinsed off, and then I threw it away again right before going out the door.

How hard it is, that's the whole point. If it's hard, if it's the hardest thing for the whole day. If I can stuff the huge throw you knitted all yourself into a garbage sack, if I can carry it out the door, even drag it on the concrete. If I can lift the dumpster lid and then smash the bag in with my hands, smash it deep into strangers' garbage of beer boxes and brown food and boxes and bags. If I can pull the lid back over the top of the dumpster the way it hinges up and over and then slams home. If I can do that, then I can do the next part easy. Walk the steps to my car, open the door. Lean in and let myself fall into the seat. Without you, without you, without you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleeper,

I wake up fighting lots of nights. Sit up in the bed and look around the room and bring in breaths, and then see where I am and that it's okay, that the ache coming from my hands is because they've been tightened into fists, knuckles out.

I wake up with my jaw viced down so tight the muscles in the side of my head rumble. I can hear them. Sometimes it's the noise that wakes me.

I wake up breathless, drowned in the dark.

I wake up laughing. That one is the worst, if you can believe it.

That's what it's been like since you left.

It's not your fault. That's how it was before you got here too. Before you squeezed in against me, pulled my arm around you and tucked it underneath. Before your hand on me. Before your hand gripped under my leg. The lights off, the door closed, the music low. Your book on the nightstand, the slip of paper between the pages ticking away our nights.

You slowed everything down. Stopped the fights in my sleep. Stopped the sprints. Stopped my fists. Stop me pressing my feet together so hard the insoles ached.

It was you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Forever Young,

Whenever I drove to your house I would drink a cup of coffee. It didn't matter if it was ten in the morning or so late that the stoplights were flashing and I only had to stop six times from my house to your house. Whatever time it was, I would drink a cup of coffee so I could be awake and feel like I was alive enough for you. Then I would brush my teeth in the car, spit at one of the six stops if it was night time.

You were so young. I wanted to be young too. At least for the first few hours every time I saw you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Skin,

Your skin is the largest organ your body's got. Untethered from your body, yours would weigh something around three kilograms. The weight of a 3-liter bottle of Coke in your hands. About that heavy. Nineteen-million skin cells in each square inch.

Every 28 days those skin cells die and swap out for new ones.

28 days for nineteen-million little deaths.

28 days after the last time we touched, you had skin that I'd never touch.

To think. All that. All of that skin. All of your lovely skin, the color from inside an almond.

All nineteen-million of it. Not one cell will I ever put lips to.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mugger,

I just dropped the coffee cup you made me. The nice one, the thick one where the handle stuck into the clay just right.

I think it was an accident.

There was this other time when I broke something and it wasn't an accident.

I got this dishwasher job at a barbecue place. I was little, fifteen or something. The place was filthy. The dishes were bad. Buffet dishes. Art projects by the time a busser slid them across the stainless steel tables in the dish pit. But the worst part was all the other dishwasher work that wasn't washing the dishes. Rotating crates of butter in the walk-in. Stacking wood in the smoker. Trash duty. Trash duty was the worst part of the worst parts. They had a big trash can with a lid that had a really strong magnet on top. So if someone threw in silverware on accident it would stick to the magnet on top and wouldn't go out in the trash. It was horrible because, let's say a fork got pinned to the magnet. The fork would collect more and more trash all around it. It pinned chicken skin and napkins bathed in ranch dressing so they made a curtain of wet garbage at the opening of the trash can. You, you the dishwasher, you had to pull all that meat and sauce and paper apart before you could wheel the trash can to the dumpster and haul out the bag.

One of my first nights there I didn't know anything. I put the dishes away, but I couldn't do it fast because I didn't know where any of them went. There was a huge wire rack behind me full of big plates and little plates and plastic salad plates molded to look like they were made of lettuce leaves.

At almost the end of the night, a bowl slid across the table into the dish pit. It was white with a blue stripe along the rim. I scrubbed it out, and I looked all over the dish rack, but I couldn't find space for it anywhere. No other white bowls with blue stripes. No space. I looked all over the place, and pretty soon I was mad because there just wasn't a place, and then I spent more time on that one dish than I did on the last ten dishes. So I decided to drop it, and it broke, and then I knew where it went. Right in the fucking trash can.

It was different with dropping your cup in my kitchen. And it was the same too. It was different because I didn't mean to break it. It was the same because I didn't know where it should go anymore. It was different because that cup was for me. But it was the same because I got to throw it away after, and that was the easiest thing to do.

Best,
Pete

Dear Happy Camper,

When we went camping, I should have helped more when you set up inside the tent. Once I got the poles snapped together and the stakes in the dirt, you took over. You took a pile of stuff and made it into the best sleep. The day was too hot and I was covered in filth, dirt carried in the river water that dried on my skin. That night, the camp was loud with everyone drinking so much. We went in the tent, and I put my hand on your hip and fell asleep.

I should have paid attention to how. How you took nylon propped up with sticks and turned it into a place for sleep like that.

I tried to do it myself this time. I brought blankets, but they weren't right. I tried to arrange them soft under me, but the ground was hard and my hips woke me up with ache. I forgot to bring a pillow. In three days the tent was so full of sand I might as well have slept outside.

Sometimes people say I Need You, and they mean it in a way where they just feel it. It's the feeling they have about you.

I Need You. Not like that, though, not in the feelings way. I really need you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Graphic,

It's hard for me to talk about sex stuff. I don't think it's anyone's fault. Just a different feeling about things.

I was in the car when I thought about how it was when I used to sleep next to you. Sometimes when you would wake up a little bit, you would grab my arm and pull it around you like a blanket. And then you would hold my hand and push it up to your breast, for me to hold it. Then you would fall back asleep.

When I was in the car and thinking about it, I could remember exactly what your breast felt like. Some things I can't remember anymore. I don't really remember your voice all the time anymore. I don't remember what it was like to hold your face with my hand. I don't remember your lips anymore. They're gone. What I remember is your breast. I don't know why, but I could still feel it, know exactly what it felt like.

I didn't remember your breast on purpose. I didn't think about your breast all the time. More than your voice or your lips or your jokes. If I could trade your breast for something else, I almost for sure would.

Best,
Pete

Dear Dryer,

Here's my dishwasher problem. I never put in the right number of dishes. Or bowls or cups. Even forks. I just cram in as much stuff as I can. When the stuff comes out, it's not clean, and I'm angry at the dishwasher even though there's not much the dishwasher can do about it.

When the dishwasher was full and the dishes slapped against each other inside and there was still a stack of plates in the sink, that's when you would say, You wash and I'll dry.

I always thought that was bullshit. Everyone knows the washer has a way harder job than the dryer.

You were way faster than me. Always ready for another wet dish way before I had one rinsed for you.

It was in me to wash faster. Not bragging, but washing dishes, that was my old job at the barbecue place. And I was good. Damn good. I never missed a spot. And I was fast.

When we washed dishes together, I was slower than you, but it was on purpose.

Long as I washed and you dried, that whole time we could stand at the sink. Your hip bone poked at mine. Your arms next to mine. The game where I'd run a soapy hand all down your arm from elbow to wrist to knuckle, then flip over, then to palm, to fingertip. I did that part fast, but careful. I never missed a spot.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mrs. Clean,

In the shower together, only one of us at a time could be in the water. Half the time I was cold and wet and I just wanted to get out of there. Plus, you would always have all your shampoo and your conditioner and all that stuff balanced on the edge of the tub, and I always knocked something over with my foot when I got in.

Today I was alone in the shower. I missed you.

I think I just miss everything.

I couldn't sleep when you slept over at night, but I miss you in the morning when I could hold onto you and sometimes then I could fall asleep.

I hated how we could never watch movies because you would fall asleep. How I would carry you to bed. How you never let me do that when you were all the way awake.

There's all these things that I thought I wouldn't miss. I don't miss them, all in one bunch of things like that. I don't miss you, the collection of all that stuff in a person. But each thing, one at a time?

Best,
Pete

Dear Rhythmic,

Remember that thing you used to do at concerts where you would clap on the downbeat?

I've asked a ton of people to try it, and everybody does the same thing. They think it'll be easy, then they try it, and it's not even a little easy.

There are other things like that too, things I got from you that I thought would be easy to replace with other people. But it turns out the things I wanted to replace weren't even a little easy. You were just good at them.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lady About Town,

I never asked about who you were going out with or what time you would come home. I thought those questions would make it hard for you to have fun. I thought I didn't need to.

I should have asked you that stuff sometimes, because sometimes if someone isn't a little jealous, you think that they don't care.

Jealous questions about where you were and who was there with you aren't the best ways to show that you think about a person. But it's one way. I should have tried something.

Best,
Pete

Dear Toucan,

I liked our times together at the grocery store. I don't like a lot of the things couples do, things like chores they just do together for no reason. But the store was fun with you.

The best part was when you picked cereal. Your tongue poked out of your mouth just a little bit. Thinking tongue. I don't know if that was on purpose, but I never wanted to say anything because what if you stopped?

Sometimes you picked out the stuff with berry slices or bran or something else that an adult would pick. But I liked it better when you picked something with a cartoon leprechaun or rabbit on it. Because when you picked out those kinds of cereals, the cartoon rabbit kinds, you would hug the box while you carried it back to the cart.

I don't know if you did that on purpose either, and same thing as the tongue. I didn't want to say anything.

It took me a long time to throw out all of your leftover cereals. When I set them in the trash I looked at all the games on the back. That was another thing I liked about sugar cereals, they always had a game on the back. I always wanted to ask what you thought about the people who made those, if it was one guy or a whole team or what. But I didn't ask because it was more fun to watch you, your eyes squinted down because you didn't have your glasses in the morning.

I put the boxes in the trash, and I was trying to think what you were thinking when you squinted at those bright boxes while you ate cereal with me at my house.

Best,
Pete

Dear Smart Shopper,

I know things don't work this way anymore, but it would be nice if you'd come with me to the store when it's time to buy shampoo. You were really good at that. When I try to smell shampoos, I can smell the first one. Then all the rest smell just like that first one, or a little like the first one, so I can't tell what's the first shampoo and what's the shampoo after that.

Did you have a trick or something? Something that you did to pick out the right one every time?

I always pick out the wrong ones. One I got smelled like how baby powder smells. All day I kept thinking there was a baby around somewhere, but it was my own hair. Or another one, it smelled okay but it made my head so dry I couldn't stand it. It hurt. I threw away the bottle almost full.

If I had more warning before you left, I would have made you show me the right way to pick.

Although if I knew you were leaving, I probably would have asked a lot of other things before I got to shampoo.

Best,
Pete

Dear Admired,

Sometimes I want to send you a letter, but when I write down all the words they sound much more creepy.

How can I admit how often I fix a second plate before I remember you're not really here?

How do I admit that I spoon a stack of pillows when I sleep?

How do I tell you that I saw you one time at the store and you didn't see me, and how do I tell you how I felt about it?

How do you admit things that are weird without sounding weird?

I don't know where exactly the line is that's the difference between what's creepy and what's sweet. It's like a border between cities. It's hard to know exactly when you crossed. But once you're way over the line from Normalsburg to Creepston, you know.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleepy,

I heard since we broke up that you slept with someone else.

It's okay. It's not my business.

I don't know what you heard, but since we broke up the only person I hugged was my brother when I dropped him off at the airport. I was breathing hard when it happened because he stood there with his backpack and his suitcase, and I didn't know if we would hug, and then we were close in together and we hugged and my arms couldn't remember if they knew how to hug right.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mind-Reader,

When we used to sleep together, when your hair was in my face, you reached back and pulled your hair forward so it draped in front of your shoulder instead of spreading out on the pillow behind you.

I never said thanks when you did that. I never knew if you were all the way awake.

Best,
Pete

Dear Strayed,

How I knew it wouldn't work if we got back together.

Because when we met up again, all I wanted to ask was if you fucked anybody else while we were apart. The answer mattered so much that I couldn't ask.

That's how I knew.

Best,

Pete

Dear Shutterbug,

Do you know why people's eyes turn red in pictures?

It's because when you're in the dark, your pupils open really wide to take in more light. When the flash goes off it lights up what's inside the pupil, the blood.

When you're see someone's red eyes in a picture, what you see is their blood.

We all have it, the blood in our eyes.

That's why they make cameras that have a thing for red eye. All it does is shine a bright light before the real flash. The bright light tightens your pupils, and then the flash doesn't light up your blood.

When your cheeks would get red while you slept, that was blood collecting there.

When we camped out and you got cold and had to get up and pee really bad, that's because your body loses heat energy to any liquid inside you. Your body makes you pee so you can stay warm.

Your body is always doing things that you don't know about. Your blood is always doing things.

Your body always did things I didn't know about. Your blood. And maybe your body thought it was for survival or something. A scientist could explain it to me, probably, but I don't think it would help.

Best,
Pete

Dear Opener,

Your fresh spare key to my apartment, that was hard for me.

I didn't think I would have the guts to ask for it back, and I was right.

You're probably not desperate to come back or anything. But now I have to lock the deadbolt and the knob every time I go out.

Best,

Pete

Dear Home Keys,

I sort of want to say I'm sorry for not fixing your typewriter. But I sort of don't.

I tried really hard. Really hard. I know nothing about typewriters, so it was kind of a stupid idea to begin with.

When I opened the thing up, the inside was more beautiful than the outside. I don't know why they put covers on typewriters. It just covers up the best parts. Each key had almost a finger attached to it, a metal skeleton finger, the bones reaching and bent at the joints to stamp the letters onto paper.

I greased all of the metal skeleton fingers with WD-40. I tried to be careful. When I lubed my motorcycle chain, the guy at the shop told me to just barely squeeze the cap hard enough to make a little droplet dribble into each link. Most people don't know, but too much lubricant gums things up worse than no lubricant.

So I tried doing that first. Then, when I got turned on to typewriter oil, I brushed all the WD-40 off with rubbing alcohol and water and started all over again.

The carnage in my apartment. Every part inside that typewriter had ink or grease on it, and my hands were inky all the time, and the walls of my apartment, the taps on the sink. The handle on my toothbrush, all of it went black that week I tried to fix your typewriter. Even the tiny buttons on the remote were covered in a black grease that wouldn't wash out for anything.

It's not that the amount of suffering makes the typewriter more or less fixed. I know that. I just wanted you to know I didn't quit on it right away. I didn't even quit after I put a mug to my lips and saw my black fingerprints all along the rim.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fan,

The song Nightswimming used to be my song.
Then it was our song.
Now it's your song.
Just wanted to say I think that's bullshit.

Best,
Pete

Dear Just Friend,

There was this boxer Max Schmeling who fought Joe Louis in 1938. It was a big deal because they were big fighters, but also because these two guys fighting was like everything that was going bad with Germany and America. Joe Louis was American, and he was black. Max Schmeling was the product of Germany, and he got famous about the same time Germany was famous for doing some pretty bad stuff.

Hitler lifted the curfew in Germany for the fight, and he said when Max Schmeling won, all the prize money would go to building German tanks.

What didn't come out until later was that Max didn't want any part of the tank stuff. He wouldn't fire his Jewish manager even though they told him to. He turned down an Honor Dagger from Hitler. Later on, in Germany, when things were really bad, Max hid two children in his home. He kept them safe.

Nobody knew that they kept Max's wife and his mother in Germany to make sure that Max came back from America after the fight with Joe Louis. Nobody knew that Max's manager wasn't allowed in his corner, and then his regular corner man turned Max down because he was afraid. Max went out to fight alone. He went out to fight and people threw cigarette butts at him. Max went out by himself, and he didn't even have himself because he wasn't the person everyone said he was.

In one round Joe Louis knocked down Max three times. He hit him in the body, in the jaw. He hit him more than thirty times in that one round.

Max was put into an ambulance. Cracked vertebrae. He said he could remember being in the ambulance. He heard people celebrating in the street. They cheered about how bad he was hurt.

When they were both older, Max and Joe Louis were friends. Max visited Joe Louis. Max helped Joe Louis with money. When Joe Louis died, Max helped pay for the funeral. He was a pallbearer for Joe Louis. He held onto Joe Louis one last time.

It takes a lot to be someone like that. Like Max. So it's not impossible for us to be friends. People with worse history than us made it work.

But I'm no Max Schmeling.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ageless,

I think all the time about the mornings we would spend in bed when you would put your hands on my cheeks and mash my face down so it looked saggy and so you knew what I would look like when I was old. You said that I looked okay for being old.

When I did it to your face, you looked really good still. I could pull your face down, but then you would smile and your cheeks would slip out of my hands. I didn't want to hold your face too hard. I never found out what you would look like when you smiled and you were really old.

I did it to myself in the mirror the other day. I was really tired, and I had face stubble and nose hairs and a championship hard zit. The mirror was dirty.

It was the oldest my face has ever been. It was terrible.

What you said about me looking old and okay. It's not the lie that runs around me all day. It's wondering if you were lying to me or lying to you. If you were lying to you because you wanted to still be here when I had that old face. Or if you were lying to me because we were in a bed together and you had your hands on my face right then.

Best,
Pete

Dear Relativity,

Three years together went really fast. How when you try to kill a housefly and he's so fast he jumps away before you even swing at him.

Our three years went fast. Then it was over.

Then I tried to be friends with all my friends again. The three years, the years that were housefly years for me, it was regular for them. Or really slow.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sasquatch,

My bath tub drain needed snaking almost every week when you were here. Your hair was so long.

I tried baking soda and vinegar the first couple times the drain got slow. Then I tried a plunger. I think the hair clog was too open, had too much space to make the plunger work on it. Then I tried a chemical. That worked, but I had to do it all the time.

So then I bought a drain auger.

It's this long, tight spring with a corkscrew on the end. You stick the corkscrew into the drain, and then you keep feeding out the spring until it gets stuck up against something. Then you turn the crank and the corkscrew bites into whatever's in there, and then you push and pull and break it up.

When I pulled the corkscrew back it was full of nested hair, and I had a hell of a time pulling the hairs out of the corkscrew's curved metal.

Your hair looked so much better on your head than it did tangled and coated in scum and yanked out of the drain. Forty hundred times better spread out on a pillow or tied up high while you were doing something with your hands.

The most I touched your hair was cranking it out of the bath tub drain. The wet nests of it. The worst kind of your hair.

I never told you because I was afraid you would think I hated your hair, or you might get a haircut, or never shower at my place anymore. I'd wrap the hair in paper towels and bury it in the trash. The drain auger lived in the back of the cabinet under the sink. The way back.

I didn't want you to get a haircut or stop showering at my place. I didn't want you to leave early and shower at your place. I didn't want anything to change.

Best,
Pete

Dear Journaler,

I started writing down one thing a day that was nice about that day. At the end of the day I would get out a green notebook that was only for writing that stuff down. The things I wrote were really small sometimes, because sometimes you just don't get much good out of a whole day.

I thought I could flip backwards in the green book when I felt bad because then it would help me remember that some good stuff happened too.

It worked okay for a while because I spent the whole day looking for something good, and I think when you're always looking for something good you'll find it. Like this friend I had when I was a kid who always looked for lighters on the ground because he always found lighters on the ground. If you have to write down something good, if you look, then something you'd maybe forget, like the time when I found a wad of dollars in my coat pocket, is a bigger deal. It's something that can go in the green book. And when I wrote it in the green book, I could go to bed.

I didn't finish the notebook. I stopped. It worked for a while, but then it didn't. There were nights when I stayed up late with the TV because I was afraid to go into the bedroom. I couldn't face that notebook on nights when there was nothing to write down.

One night I slept on the couch just to avoid going in there and thinking over a whole day and not remembering anything good. So then I threw out the notebook because it was making things worse instead of better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Called,

I wish I'd said your name out loud more. I still say it to myself sometimes. I know how it's supposed to go. What that voiceless glottal fricative sounds like. How right after that my jaw moves down and my tongue touches my bottom front teeth just a little. Then my tongue moves in between my teeth for the interdental. Then lips in a circle. The R, it's one of the hardest sounds to learn if you didn't start out with English.

I know the word. I know the parts of the word that make it into a whole word. I know the names of the positions my mouth moves into when I move my mouth to say your name now, quiet, by myself.

There was so much about your name that I didn't know then. When I had the chance to say it out loud as much as I wanted. There's so much about your name that I know now.

I learned all about your name the wrong way, at the wrong time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Torch,

Thank you for the candle, the one with the wooden wick.

I try really hard not to live how people think I live. I like it when people at work are surprised because the chili or enchiladas I bring in from home smell good. I don't want to live the way a guy all alone is supposed to live.

But I never would have thought about a candle. They all smell strange and perfumed to me. Or they smell okay in the store, but then it's another story when they're on my desk and on fire.

Then you think about each candle and the person who buys it. This one is clean and sweet. A lady who doesn't get to her laundry as fast as she'd like. Another one is the smell of flower petals laced with toilet cleaner. A lady who owns an art store and hides her smoking from her nephews with this candle.

It took me a while to get used to the smell without you. The smell of cedar and a little bit of brown sugar. A woman who fights with her boyfriend because he won't start. A woman trying to cue him when she wants to have sex. A woman who ran out of words for asking.

It's still you whenever I take a match to it. Cedar and brown sugar. That smell is always you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mrs. Cratchett,

I really hated Christmas at your house. I hated it because your whole family was there, and your nieces and nephews made us get up really early, and there was so much stuff by the tree that it took all morning to open everything up.

All I really wanted was to sleep with you in the bed because I didn't have to go to work or be anywhere special. And then have a really good breakfast. With you.

I got some things, but I never got what I wanted from you on Christmas.

Best,
Pete

Dear Heartsick,

I think I finally understand what you said about that feeling like your heart was heavy. That feeling I asked you to explain so many times.

All your guts and your organs fill up. It all hurts in the way it hurts when you eat too much food and it won't go away. Your parts all weigh a whole bunch more than they're supposed to, but the stuff that connects them to your body doesn't get any stronger so it all pulls pulls pulls. Everything weighs so much that you're kind of ready for it to break loose so everything can start hurting in a way that makes sense.

Like that?

Best,
Pete

Dear Manolo,

The shoe tree burned down last week.

Keep reading. It matters.

You remember the shoe tree. We drove by on the way to that secondhand store that had all the floor lamps. It's that tree in the country where people would go at night and nail their old shoes to it. In the day you see all the bright pink trainers and shining heels against the grey cottonwood bark.

I know you remember the shoes you left at my place. The ones you called about having back. The sneakers with the green sides.

It made me feel a lot better to hammer nails through those shoes. I needed some violence right then. Skewering a shoe to a tree, it's the thing most like violence I can handle.

There's always been a shoe tree in town, but it's never the same tree very long. It's never the same tree because the shoe trees always burn down and then someone has to decide on a new shoe tree.

Almost right after I nailed your shoes to the shoe tree, it burned. I didn't know for sure it would happen, that someone would light it up. But it happened that way with all the other shoe trees. So I don't want to say I burned your old shoes. But pretty much I burned your old shoes.

Best,
Pete

Dear Interrogative,

With you, it's the questions.

When we walked downtown, near the bottom end of 16th where all the bums go at night. When you saw one of the bums on a bench, and he was in a bright blue sleeping bag, and he was turned towards the back of the bench so you could only see the top of his hat where it poked out of the sleeping bag's hole. When you said, Do you think they get cold?

When I said, Why do you ask me questions like that?

And you said, Because sometimes I hope you'll say no.

Lying isn't hard. It would have been an easy lie to say they looked warm enough

Best,

Pete

Dear Baker,

That pumpkin cake you made for my birthday was really good. You could make that cake with its thick frosting and warm spice for anyone's birthday and they would be really happy. But you didn't make cakes for anyone's birthday. You made them for my birthday.

Even though things are different, I could still eat that cake on my birthday and be pretty happy. I would still have to hold my hand over my mouth to keep from everyone seeing cake through me smiling.

Best,
Pete

Dear Linked,

Does your family ask about me?

Best,
Pete

Dear Think Tank,

For a while there, I thought maybe it would work again.

I thought maybe the problem was everyone else, not us.

I thought maybe I could get rid of all my stuff, and you could get rid of all your stuff.

I thought maybe we could run off where no one knew us.

I thought maybe we could run off where no one knew.

I thought maybe Oregon.

I thought maybe if we got far enough, we'd only have to think about what we wanted to think about.

I thought maybe Canada.

I thought maybe without all these other people around who knew you and knew me, we could live happy again.

I thought maybe Alaska.

I thought maybe Australia.

I thought about a lot of things.

I think I still love you. Maybe. Somewhere in Antarctica.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fellow Scumbag,

These pajamas I've been wearing are kind of terrible. This plaid shirt is missing a really important button so my belly hairs curl out. The green pants are too short, and when I've got shoes on my socks wink out all the time.

I mention shoes because I've been wearing this getup outside. At first only in the car. Then for a quick tortilla chip run. Then, you know.

They're terrible. I think you'd like them a lot.

Best,
Pete

Dear Spearmint,

When my mom told me she worked at the Wrigley factory, I asked if it was great. I asked if she got unlimited free gum. I liked Wrigley gum. For a kid it was hard to figure why a person would ever give up a job at a factory with free gum.

What I didn't know is that when you work somewhere, whatever you work around becomes just things. The burger place, it wasn't really like making food anymore. It was just things. Objects. Items. They didn't really mean what they used to mean, something warm and good and that made me feel full. We just built these things, put together units and moved them around.

Books kind of went the same way. For the first little while it was great to work with books. There was so much to look at and think about. I must have made twenty different plans to figure what to read next.

Then they weren't books anymore. They were things. Just more things, different shapes of things than from the burger place, but things. They weren't special anymore. I saw them too much. Handled them too much.

Does that happen for you?

I don't know what can keep me from feeling like that. It happened with food. It happened with books. Something for your brain and something for your stomach, and both went the same way.

Did you see me too much? Did you forget how I made you feel?

Did you handle me too much?

Is the job of being my girlfriend, does that job make me less exciting? Like gum at the Wrigley factory?

Best,
Pete

Dear Carpenter,

Today I used a little piece of a matchbox to fix a door.

The door was warped because it was the bathroom door and there's no window in the bathroom, so the shower steam messes it all up.

What a lot of people would do is see that the top part of the door was hitting the top part of the frame and try and sand down the door and the frame. Because it's like that thing where people say there's a square peg in a round hole. You have to either fix the hole or the peg, or maybe a little of both.

The right thing is to screw down the bottom hinges really tight, then unscrew the top hinge. Then, on the doorframe side, slide in a broken down matchbox into the place the hinge goes. Then screw the hinge right into the same place with the matchbox underneath, between it and the door frame. Just that little difference fixes the door.

When people say there's a square peg in a round hole, it's not always that simple. Because there's the shape of the door, the shape of the frame, but there's a third thing which is how the door swings. If it swings crooked, it still won't work right, even if it's the right peg for the hole.

I think you'd like what I've done with the place. I put a new flapper in the toilet tank so it doesn't drip anymore. And new washers in the sink so it doesn't drip anymore either. The bathroom door isn't perfect, but it's a lot easier than it was. It's a whole new place.

Best,
Pete

Dear Uncertainty,

We learned about this thing in school called the Observer Effect.

It's simple. If you're trying to measure something, you might change that thing by measuring it. Like a thermometer. Let's say I put a cold thermometer into a really small glass of water. If the thermometer is cold and the water is warm, putting the thermometer in there cools off the water just a little bit. Or if you try to figure out how fast something moves, how do you find out without changing its speed just a little bit? It's a really tiny difference, but if you put a sensor in my shoe to see how fast I'm walking, the new weight or shape of the shoe might mess things up just a little bit.

It works in a lot of other things, sort of. If you're cooking something in the oven and open the oven to check on it, you let the heat out of the oven and change the environment, change what you'll end up with. If you check the air on your tires, the pressure gauge works by letting just a little bit of the air out, so it changes how much air is in the tire.

I'm starting to get why you didn't like it when I asked you if you were okay, why me asking that made you upset. I was trying to measure something, but the way I was trying to measure it changed how you felt. Me asking too much made you upset. I get that now. I kind of wish you learned about the Observer Effect in school too. Explaining how you feel, using science stuff to talk to me, that would have helped.

Best,
Pete

Dear Toasted,

Whenever someone holds up a glass, there's time to think about a wish. Not much time. But that's okay. I always know what I'm asking for.

It's always the same. Every time someone lifts a champagne flute or an uncapped bottle or a highball glass. Every time.

Nobody ever says it out loud. Nobody says the thing that I'm wishing for. Not even me. I go along with whatever they say. Just behind my lips, that's the living place for what I'm asking after.

I took some toasts away from people when I shouldn't have. Weddings. When a guy I know was leaving and we held up liquor so his plane wouldn't crash. I did it one time when we were toasting my friend's dead father. Even that one I couldn't give away.

Don't tell them. I'm only telling you this.

If you don't come back, come back home, I don't really care if people get divorced or crash planes. If you don't come back, all the fathers eventually die anyway.

I need this. I need a reason to pick up a glass.

When I wish, I get just the littlest time. From the time after the wish until the time liquor touches my lips, that's the only time I let myself miss you. When I let myself want you to come up next to me and hook your arm in my arm while we drink next to each other. When I could have the only thing I want and then I could start wanting things for other people again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lady Roget,

I hated that thesaurus on your desk. I hated how you couldn't just say things the way you thought things.

That letter you left on my dresser? That word? Malefactor? That word didn't hurt. I knew it wasn't yours.

Best,
Pete

Dear Curious,

We never really talked about my running. It was kind of something that we didn't talk about. I don't think I wanted to say.

There wasn't much use worrying anyone over hills, running up and down hills until I couldn't remember where I was. Every time I made it to the top, I'd kick rocks onto the sidewalk's edge. To keep count. Without some help I couldn't remember how many times it'd been.

There wasn't much help in talking blisters. How the blood got to be a problem until I came up with the easy fix. Black socks.

To get in a good distance, there was this loop I took. Past the movie theater I went to as a kid. Past my college where I drank vended coffee and turned sentences into diagrams with stilts and platforms. Past my high school, the hospital they took me to when I broke my arm and they gave me a bright orange cast. Past the apartment where my grandmother lived, the park where we lit off firecrackers. Past where I would go to hear your voice recitals, the street where I picked up a dead cat who was a stone in my arms, wrapped in my sweater. The coffee shop where I did homework so late that I'd walk home with my eyes closed. Past the dirtiest house I'd ever seen that got turned into a parking lot, past the daycare I went to, past the place I found a stray dog who wouldn't go home and wouldn't stop running with me.

If there was something to run from, I wasn't doing too good a job avoiding it. Everything ever was out there.

I'd finish running sometimes. You were waiting for me. Reading on the couch, sometimes sleeping on the couch with your thumb wedged in the book's pages. I'd open the door as quiet as I could so I could see how you were while I was gone.

Yesterday I was out late, running. A long time. I don't know how long. I don't wear a watch anymore. Black socks, but no watch. On the sidewalk, right outside my front door, I stopped to take a few breaths with my hands up on my hips. Then I turned away from the door and kept going. Up the slope the other way. Towards the closed grocery store that used to make great chocolate fried cinnamon donuts.

I don't know what happened. It can't be running away. It can't be running away because I went by everything. And I don't know where you are.

If I'm out, up the hill and then turning towards the barbecue place that smells so good late at night.

If I'm out, if I'm still going, if I don't know where you are, for all I know I might be running straight to you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Table For One,

When I go into places to eat, what I'll do is look around like I'm expecting someone. Then walk the dining room. Past tables with families or so many people that they've got a chair pushed up to their booth. Then I go back outside. Rub at my watch. Then pretend like I'm through waiting.

This is the big part.

You walk in and talk to the woman standing with the black leather folder. You say it like you haven't done this part before. Haven't done it for two dinners and a lunch already this week.

Um. I guess one?

Best,
Pete

Dear Careless,

My camera disappeared somewhere between Philadelphia and New York and home. I lost it.

The pictures got lost too. Liberty Bell. Rocky statue. Buildings and buildings and buildings.

On the train to Coney Island, when I still had my camera. The train stopped right over this graveyard. The sun was low. Golden Hour. That's what they call it in movies. They call it Golden Hour even though it doesn't even last a whole hour most times.

I got off the train for a good picture. Golden Hour happens when it's ready, and it doesn't wait for you to be somewhere nicer than a graveyard under the train.

The longer it is since coming back from the city, the less I remember. Maybe half a dozen of all the pictures are left for me in my head. The Brooklyn Bridge, the Wonder Wheel through the fog. The Golden Hour graveyard.

Getting off the train to take the graveyard picture makes me remember that one. It's not the kind of choice I make very much, waiting on another train to take a picture just because the light is really nice.

I guess sometimes you take a picture of something, and all the work from taking the picture makes you remember almost as good as the picture would.

Best,
Pete

Dear Imposter,

Your nose is the same as someone else's nose. Someone I used to see. It's a nice nose. I love that nose. It's pushed back a little. It's hard to describe it without making it sound like a pig nose, but it's not a pig nose at all. It's really great.

Hell, you know what your own nose looks like.

I didn't mean to look at you so long. It just took me a while to figure out what it was about your face. Then it was hard to look away. Then I thought about what if it was dark and I couldn't see and I touched your nose. Not anything else. Your hair was different, and the rest of your face. But your nose. I didn't think anyone else would have that nose.

There are parts of a person that you thought wouldn't ever show up again. Not on a Tuesday. At a sandwich place. On a stranger's face.

Best,
Pete

Dear Dream-y,

I was out getting a coffee and I heard a kid slurping his cocoa. I remembered that thing you used to do where you would drool in your sleep, and when you woke up you would slurp it back in. I forgot all about that, and I might not have remembered if I didn't hear it.

Something happens all the time, then it never happens, then it's gone. Unless you get lucky and a kid slurps his cocoa.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cozy,

It wasn't until you that I saw someone bring a blanket into the movie theater.
I didn't think they'd even let us.

You pick up little things from people. Ways to talk or think that don't belong to you. Then those things belong to you.

I'm going to the movies this weekend. With somebody. I don't know if we're at movie blanket yet. There's a blanket in my trunk. The one that's been there since you and me sat under it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pink Lady,

Some people don't turn out like their parents. But there's some of the same in there.

If you end up being a lot like your mom in twenty or thirty years, maybe call me again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cat Fancier,

Now that it's over, here's what I always wanted to say.
I really fucking hated your cat. You can do better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bride,

At some point in your life you go to a lot of weddings. I don't know if it's because people all get married at the same age or if maybe it's a domino thing where one person gets married and that puts the idea in someone else's head and pretty soon everyone is getting married. I don't know how it works.

When I remember the weddings I went to, I can't remember which one I'm thinking about. They all moosh together.

We all sit down. I look at how everyone's dressed. Not because clothes are much for me, but there's always an uncle or someone who looks like he was out working in his yard and then hopped straight in his car to come to the wedding.

I look around in my suit pockets. I try to leave something in there from the last time I wore it so there's something to find, even if it's just a sugar packet.

Then I kind of run out of stuff to do.

It's hard to come up with things to think about when you're at a wedding and you're by yourself. You can't bring anything with you, so you're just there. You watch people say really private stuff to each other, which doesn't feel okay. Or they don't say any private stuff, which is even worse.

It makes me sad all the time. Every time they start saying things to each other, it all kind of sounds the same.

And they use the word "soul" too much.

And then a photographer runs in and takes a picture of something that I would think you would remember.

Then I check my other suit pockets and hope something's there. Please, just a beer lid. Anything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Shredded,

My mom used to cut our old clothes and stuff into rags. All of our old shirts, towels, sheets, she'd cut them all up into rags to use around the house.

She must have done most of the cutting and ripping when nobody else was around because I can't remember her doing it. We would just come home and there was a new set of rags that used to be your forest green sweatshirt. You'd drop a coke in the kitchen, and half way through wiping it up you would realize you were rubbing your old soccer shirt all over the floor. You always need more rags is what she would say.

There were a couple things she tore up that I was mad about. I had this Mr. T beach towel she tore into rags. There was a Ghostbusters shirt that she shredded too, but that was kind of my fault. It was way too big to begin with, and I spilled Kool-Aid all over it the first time I wore it. Cutting it into rags was a mercy killing as much as anything. And you always need more rags.

Now I do it at home just like my mom did.

The other day I was on a rag-making thing. I pulled a bunch of clothes out. Some were going to charity pick-up in a bag, but not too many. Being just a guy living by myself, most of the stuff I stop wearing, it's because nobody should wear it. Not because of fashion. Because it's made all out of holes and stains.

There was a pair of old pajama pants that I was sad to see go, but it made nice rags.

There were a couple of shirts that you left here. I kind of didn't want to cut them up. These shirts were it. When these shirts were gone, I wouldn't hold any of your clothes again.

I cut your shirts. When I was done I stuck all the new rags in the washing machine to wash them up and mix them up so I wouldn't know which ones were which.

I didn't know if I still needed your shirts. But you always need more rags.

Best,

Pete

Dear Morpheus,

I used to see a woman who would move around when she had nightmares. Her arms moved up against me, her fingers scratched at the mattress. She had a lot of nightmares.

We would go to bed, and she would tell me to wake her up if she started to move around a lot.

I would. I did. I woke her up out of the first ones. The first ones didn't bother her so much. She could turn over and go back to sleep. The nightmares later at night were way worse. She would shake. Her arms and legs moved around. That always woke me up. I would use my hands and grab her and rub her and she would take a really big fast breath right when she woke up.

Almost every night we spent together went that way.

Sometimes she would tell me the dreams in the morning. When she did, she would get mad because a lot of times, I laughed. I know that when your dog turns into a dinosaur and eats some people in a dream, it's really scary. But when you tell someone about it, it's pretty funny. You start thinking about a T-Rex with a dog collar on and maybe a Hawaiian shirt.

We didn't sleep together very many times, me and this woman. I could never be asleep next to her. She would start in on shaking and need me to wake her up over and over and over.

At first I kind of liked it. That she needed me.

But that stuff where someone else needs you, you start to hate it. Some nights you just want to sleep. You have fights because she wants to stay over more. She sleeps better when you're there to save her from nightmare stuff, but you sleep worse and start to use your fifteen minute breaks at work to put your head down on a table and sleep, and the more you do that the more you can fall asleep after only one or two of the minutes.

I don't want that anymore. I don't want someone who needs me that much.

Best,
Peter

Dear One-Legged Woman,

I didn't notice you only had one leg until someone told me. Or that you had one leg that's only half a leg. One and a half legs total? However it is, you know what I mean.

What I'm saying is, I didn't notice something was wrong with your leg.

I saw your face way before your leg.

Please don't be mad at me. But I had a bunch of questions about your fake leg.

When you hang around at home on a Sunday morning, do you put it on or leave it off?

The leg, I mean.

Do you take it off right before bed and then put it on right away again in the morning?

I wondered if you had sex with the fake part of you on or off. Or if maybe you did it with the leg sometimes off and sometimes on.

Let's say there was such a thing as soul mates. Are you still a soul mate if part of you is missing?

Please don't be mad at me for all the questions about your fake leg. Or maybe I should say that different.

Please don't be mad at me for all the questions. The questions aren't to make you feel bad, the kind that kids ask the fat kid at school about breaking chairs or whatever. It's all really new to me. And I'm not comparing. I'm sorry. I know how people always ask about the missing parts.

Best,
Pete

Dear Aging,

I just passed up the age my dad was when he had me.

I can kind of get why he had such a hard time with all of it.

Best,
Pete

Dear Silly Rabbit,

I think you can know about a person from their favorite cereal.

A girl I knew who liked Froot Loops hated milk and only used it for cereal. Fruit Loops people are picky.

Everyone I knew who liked Wheaties didn't have a favorite cereal yet. Wheaties people are unfinished.

Cap'n Crunch people like to get stoned a lot.

Rice Krispies is for someone who has a long time to eat breakfast in the morning. It takes a long time to chase those rice pieces around with a spoon. Rice Krispies people must be patient.

This guy I knew who liked Frosted Mini Wheats was always trying to hide a sweet tooth. Kind.

Froot Loops. A person who likes a lot of experiences packed into one cereal. Discontented.

Honey Graham O's is my favorite. I don't know what that says. I don't think I get to decide that one because it's my own cereal. But maybe you can. Maybe that will help you know how you feel about me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lifer,

Remember those anniversary cards we had to sign every year at work? I hated those things. Everyone wrote the same kind of stuff.

Wow! I can't believe it's been seven years!
Geez, a few more years and you'll be running the place!
Thanks for all you do here.
Keep up the good work.

It was like signing yearbooks. Remember that? People who just wrote the same crap.

Stay cool and fun!
Here's my number. Call me sometime and we'll hang out!
Have an awesome summer!

I always tried to sign the anniversary cards with something funny. I guess I was one of the jokesters I hated, but at least the jokesters were better than the half-assers. And a work anniversary card didn't feel like the right place to put my phone number.

If I'm being honest, though, I would have liked to put my phone number on yours.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sounding Board,

I asked someone I was seeing what I'm like drunk.

I was kind of drunk when I asked.

She laughed when I asked her. She said, You talk more. And you smile.

Then she held my ears in her hands and kissed me right under my left eye and then under my right eye. Her special kiss for me that meant my mouth tasted like warm liquor.

Those were okay things, smiles and talk. Drunk me sounded alright. He had his own special kiss.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ritzy,

When my ex said, "I think we should break up," I remember not listening to her anymore because of a Ritz crackers box on the table. They were the Hint of Salt kind, the kind that has less sodium.

I wanted to stop everything and put those crackers away in the cupboard. I don't know what I wanted to be on the table, but it wasn't Ritz crackers in the red box with the little blue ribbon that says how there's not as much salt.

My ex probably didn't notice that red box, but I did. I kept thinking about how stupid they looked there in the middle of us being sad, and how it would have looked better at least if they were the regular Ritz crackers.

The truth was one day at work my chest was sore and then I ran to the bathroom to throw up, but nothing came out. I didn't go to the doctor. I don't know what happened, but I was scared so I decided to eat a little nicer.

That was something I didn't want to talk about right then. I just wanted to put the box back in the cabinet. More than anything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hubble,

The first time I saw a shooting star was the first time my mom saw a shooting star. We were camping, and it was really cold out. We were standing together outside the tent, and it was night and you could see the stars. My mom unzipped her long coat, and then I stood in front of her and she zipped me up inside the front of her coat with her.

We talked about shooting stars, and both of us said we'd never seen one.

Then, right then, we both saw one.

It was really big. I know it's all wrong, but in my memory of it, I remember that it made a sound too, like a whoosh, or like a rocket taking off or something like that. It probably didn't, but remembering it that way feels good so I want to keep remembering it that way.

I saw a bunch more shooting stars after that, and the most I ever saw was after I moved into my first apartment.

It seemed like every night when I drove into the parking lot I would see a shooting star. It happened three nights in a row before I figured out that it wasn't right, and when I looked I saw an old antenna on the roof that reflected my headlights when I drove by. It looked like a shooting star. Every time.

Everything about astronomy is kind of discouraging. They always tell you how the stars you can see aren't even alive anymore and are just the lights of stars that are dead, or how space is full of nothing and it doesn't even know we're alive.

Space stuff doesn't know anything about what it's like to stand inside your mom's coat and look up at the sky.

I don't really like astronomy very much.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pigpen,

When you stayed over and left that oatmeal to dry in the bowl after you left, I worried.

It's okay if you're a sloppy person. I'm sloppy sometimes. I don't know if you remember, but there was unflushed pee in the toilet the first time you came over to my apartment. Sloppy is something I'm used to.

The thing is, I tried really hard early on. I wanted it to work out, so I pushed away all that stuff. That normal, sloppy stuff. Tried to remember to do things like not wear the same pants too many days in a row, not eat anything too onion-y for lunch, not ride in your car with an open cup of coffee. I tried to remember to flush all the pee.

That bowl you left in the sink, the one with a crust of dried oatmeal sluiced in the bottom. When I wet it down and scraped a fork along the inside, it wasn't about you being sloppy. It was about me thinking that you didn't care so much.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tactile,

Most things, you can kind of guess what they'll feel like.

When I was still a kid, my dad asked if I'd ever felt a boob. I hadn't. I wouldn't for a long time. But I said yes anyway, and he didn't believe me.

He said, Tell me what it felt like.

I said it was like a balloon full of syrup.

There was a question at the end of the way I said it. Voice up high, eyes down low.

My dad said balloon full of syrup wasn't a bad guess.

When I did touch a breast way later, it felt like I thought it would. To my hands. It was softer, but it was still almost, kind of a small, warm balloon full of syrup.

When I kissed a girl the first time, it felt like I thought it would. To my lips.

Sex felt like the way I thought it would. To my body. To my skin.

Some things, I can guess.

Your hair. I've never touched it, but I can guess what it would feel like. My fingers can. They have all sorts of ideas. The fingertips do, the backs of my hands. The way it is to touch your hair and to touch through your hair down to where it grows. Your face. The smooth. The warm. Your cheeks and how they move when your lips bend into a smile.

My body has all sorts of ideas.

Best,
Peter

Dear Half-Glass,

My brother puked in my car last week. Late night, dead of winter. I had to take it to the car wash the next day after all the puke warmed up a little and I could wash it off.

It wasn't his fault.

I washed the whole inside and the outside, and I clipped the car mats to the little clamps and blasted them with water until the water ran clear. Then I shot them with the soap. I don't know if you're supposed to use soap on the mats. But I do know they're not supposed to have puke on them, so I was just doing the best I could.

I ran the heat on the floor that day to dry the mats out faster. They still smell. Hot car soap up doesn't smell a ton better than puke. I ran the heat on the floor mats so that if someone else got in my car, hopefully it wouldn't smell like puke. Or maybe even like the smell of a car that was cleaned out after someone puked in it. That if someone got in my car, folded her long legs over the seat's edge and closed the floor, she wouldn't smell the puke floor. When she grabbed at the seatbelt with her soft hands, she wouldn't have a clue about the belt being puked up so bad I had to pull the housing off and scrub inside.

I ran the heater to try and wear out the vomit smell in my car, just in case. That counts as optimism for right now.

Best,
Pete

Dear Addison-Wesley,

If you fell in love tomorrow. Even if it was great. Even if you made donuts together in the mornings when you should have been at work. Even if you never bought one of those dumb travel cups because you both drank coffee at home and held hands and sat on the same side of the breakfast table so you could look out the window. Even if every time you touched her hand you would rub the back and then turn it over and rub the palm and find new things, new lines or a small cut from yesterday. Even if it was that way with her hands every day. Even if you pulled cookbooks down from the library shelves tomorrow to start flipping through donut recipes. If that started tomorrow, do you ever think how it's too late and you already spent the most of your life alone?

Best,
Pete

Dear Soundless,

At night I've been falling asleep with the radio on. In the morning the radio will still be on and it's so loud. So much louder than it was when I fell asleep.

I stay in my apartment a lot. I don't really like to leave. When I do, everything outside, it's like the radio that I left on. It's so loud. The cars are too loud. People say hello too loud, and even my shoes on the pavement are too loud.

It can't ever be quiet. Quiet the way it is in my apartment right before I fall asleep.

Best,
Pete

Dear Minimum,

Today I liked the weather, at least. The clouds that gave in this afternoon, laid the heavy rain down on the sidewalk. That happens when you get older. You start enjoying the At Least things.

At Least it's warm outside.

At Least I can sleep in tomorrow.

At Least I still made it to work on time.

At Least is a sad way to live. But At Least it's a way.

Best,
Pete

Dear Drugged,

After being sick so long, I got used to falling asleep from cold medicine. I was taking too much. Almost twice the dose. But it worked for me, and since I don't take medicine very often I figured it was okay.

It's been a long time since my body felt so terrible. Every night I woke up covered in sweat, then I'd have to change clothes, and when I balled up my soaked pants, I'd shiver so hard I was afraid I was going to chatter my teeth to pieces.

When I started getting a little better, the cold medicine really helped me sleep. If you took it at eleven, you'd for sure sleep by midnight.

When I started getting almost all the way better, I had to stop cold medicine because that's how it works. You can't take cold medicine forever.

It was hard to sleep. My body didn't crave the bed the way it did before.

Cold medicine gave me a good reason for going to bed every night. It was like a companion there with me, pulling me towards the bed and reminding me how good it was to be warm and to close my eyes, how much I needed that. Cold medicine took care of me.

What I want is something like cold medicine. That's like cold medicine but for every day. To lay down with me. To make my bed something else besides the place I go to give up today.

Best,
Pete

Dear Marker,

I still use the same marker to write on the kitchen clock so I know when something should come out of the oven.

This place never felt like a home to you. I know that.

The time when you did it, though, when you got the marker and drew a little red line right after the seven, right where the rice would be done and then we'd sit down and eat it together, that made me so happy. It made me feel like you were comfortable here. Here with me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mourner,

The doctor said my grandma will probably die today. Today or tomorrow.

I just visited her. Just a month ago. She lives near Chicago. I visited her for a few days and then stayed a few days in the city.

The second night in the city, it started snowing. It wasn't too late, but it was quiet because it was winter and it was a weeknight. There wasn't much downtown besides me walking.

I walked past a restaurant and a man working a broom over the floor inside, he pointed at me and then up at the sky. It took me a breath, but he was pointing to say, Look, it's snowing. I knew it was snowing, but I liked talking to him through the window. It wasn't scary like when you have to really talk to someone and you're not ready. It was nice and then I waved and he waved and he got back to his broom and I got back to walking.

It was probably because my grandma wasn't doing so good, but when I was in Chicago, I decided to pay attention more to what made me happy. I don't feel happy much. Not really happy. Not for a long time.

With the snow and the streets so quiet, it felt like there was no reason to ever stop walking. It was cold, but the motel where I stayed was really warm and I knew it would be there when I was ready. The whole city was there, and I could see whichever parts I wanted. There was nobody around to hope I would be a certain way or make them happy, or at least that I'd be happy myself. It was a whole night where there was just a guy walking down the sidewalk, and maybe he'd talk to someone through the window and that would be enough.

That made me happy.

I wanted to write something about my grandma. But the doctor said she's unconscious and probably won't wake up again. My grandma said, she's always said, she doesn't want a funeral. She already did all the papers to donate her body to science. She was always really practical like that. She didn't make a fuss. It makes it hard to say nice things about her because I think maybe that's not what she wants.

So I'll say this.

Even though I don't have as many happy times as I'd like to, one of the best ones I can remember came right after I saw her, and I needed it. Not two years before that, or two years before that. I needed it then. I don't think I would have had that happy time if my grandma hadn't lasted so long.

Best,
Pete

Dear Parliaments,

My grandma didn't tell us she smoked all the time, but her apartment always smelled like air freshener right when we got there. And one time I found cigarettes in her glove box.

She has to be on an oxygen machine all the time now. She drags this thin, clear hose behind her all over the house.

She got pneumonia a couple times, and then one time it was so bad that she had to be on a ventilator to keep her alive, to move her lungs and her body long enough that she could get better. She was really scared from that. She was scared to die, and then she quit cigarettes.

Grandmas in movies are always ready to die. It's okay for them, and they're in bed or at home. They don't look bad. They breathe for a while and they tell someone something smart. Or they say where a treasure is buried if it's that kind of movie. Then they close their eyes, the movie grandmas. Their handsome movie grandsons have to call the grandma's name one last time to make sure she's dead. Movie grandmas die that nice.

My grandma was on her ventilator machine when I wasn't there. She couldn't tell me that there's a girl out there I better go after, or where she buried a jar of confederate bills. I already found the Parliaments buried in the glovebox of her Ford Escort. I knew about the smoke she buried with spray that was supposed to smell like the air from the Grand Tetons.

Sometimes people die and it's not like in the movies. They don't have good enough secrets to die nice.

Best,
Pete

Dear Knotted,

Most of my childhood was spent untangling cords. It feels like that anyway.

Being patient was always hard for me. I'm still not a patient person. Tangles were something I could be patient with because I knew that no matter how bad a tangle was, you could take it apart again. All you had to do was the same thing that got everything tangled, just backwards.

When things that aren't cords get all messed up, it's a lot harder. You can't do something bad and then undo it and have everything be just the way it was before. When I didn't call you enough and then tried to call you more, it didn't undo all the times that I should have called and didn't. It kept more tangles from happening, but it didn't undo the old ones. Or when you were mad and I didn't know what happened. I thought if I knew what made you mad, I could undo it.

That's what's great about when cords get messed up. You always know that no matter how bad they get, if you did the tangling thing backwards they would be back to normal again. No matter how bad. No matter how many times it happened.

Best,
Pete

Dear Prescription,

When you wake up, do you sometimes feel like there's a hundred things in your brain? That's how I feel.

It's not important stuff. It's always something like a better system to finish my laundry, or a plan to take the inks from all the pens in my apartment and put them in one super pen.

After it starts happening I can't sleep anymore. I can only think.

Does that ever happen to you? Am I okay?

If you were here, I would just ask you.

It never happened when you were here to ask.

Best,
Pete

Dear Reviewer,

I had my yearly evaluation at work. Are these hard for everyone? They're hard for me.

I wish it had been a terrible work year. I wish my evaluation said I seemed distracted and that I always showed up late and left early, and that whenever someone wanted to trade a day or a weekend, I said No. I wish it said that there was a need for improvement. I wish it said that I didn't seem as invested as I used to be. That work clearly wasn't a high priority. That I needed to adjust my work/life balance or some kind of manager words like that.

I wish it said I had a very bad year.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pocket Change,

Turning in change to the bank is much better than saving because you can spend change money on something stupid and not feel bad about it. Maybe I wouldn't blow fifty dollars on nice whiskey, but maybe I would if the money came from nowhere. If it wasn't real money.

This last time I cashed in change, I didn't know what to get.

I bought pants for work.

Pants for work are the worst. They're boring pants. I guess I could wear them when I wasn't at work. But I would be hoping the whole time that someone would say, Pete, what's with those pants? Those aren't you.

Things with money got weird after you left. I had a lot more of it. It was kind of a big surprise one time when I checked the bank. I was rich. I could have written a book. *Pete's Financial Breakup Plan*. There'd be me on the cover, smiling in a suit and tie. My face fatted up with all the steaks I was eating with my rich, single guy money. The book dedicated to you, saying thanks for the break up because now I was rich enough for suits and steaks and all the work pants a man could handle. Everything a man needs.

Best,
Pete

Dear Toe in the Water,

When I got a crown on my tooth, for a while I couldn't stop my tongue from flicking over it and running along the seam where the gold met the leftover stump of real tooth. It took a while, but then my tongue stayed in place. It stopped exploring the new tooth. Satisfied with the crown and its sitting.

I don't think I could have taken a lot more of that. My tongue, it rubbed raw on this little piece of dental cement. It's good you can get used to some things.

You get used to sleeping in a room near where the train goes by, and after a while the trains don't wake you up anymore.

You get used to the taste of things you didn't like as a kid and then they start to taste really good.

You get used to how your car feels and you don't have to think about driving it anymore.

You get used to the way your coffee isn't hot enough in the morning.

You get used to where it hurts between your ribs almost all the time.

You get used to the way you always want to sleep in the afternoon when you're supposed to listen to a meeting.

You get used to walking past where someone wrote AzzMazzter on the sidewalk when the concrete was still wet.

You can get used to anything.

I wish you couldn't get used to everything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Usher,

There's this book out there that tells people how to kill themselves. Not for killing yourself just whenever. For people who are sick or very, very old.

The advice in there feels so personal, but scientific. They tell you how much of which pills to take, and then they say to put a plastic bag over your head so you'll pass out from the pills and then die while you're asleep.

They said you should get a plastic bag and cut a couple holes in it for practice. They said you should wear it a few times before you're ready to die because that way it won't feel so strange and make you panic.

It sounds okay. I mean, to be honest, it's a little disappointing. We have all these things, these gadgets and things, all this technology. And still the best way to off yourself is a fistful of pills and a plastic bag.

They tell you to do it alone. To say goodbye and then be alone. Unless you think someone could hold your hand and be okay. That would take some kind of person. To be there.

A lot of people will tell you they don't want to die alone. .

It's just such a stupid thing to say. That's not fair, calling people stupid. It's just that people aren't saying what they really mean.

I think what they really mean is that they don't want to live alone all the way until they die.

Best,
Pete

Dear Patient,

I had to go to the doctor last week for some fluid that wouldn't drain out of my ear.

In the exam room, I could hear the doctor in the next room talking to a man. He must have been an older man or had trouble hearing because the doctor was really loud and really slow and I couldn't hear what the man's answers were.

The questions were all the same kind.

Do you feel less happy?

Do you feel like the things that used to make you happy don't make you happy anymore?

Do you feel like there are days you don't want to do anything?

Have you lost interest in things that you used to enjoy?

I could hear the doctor asking all that stuff. I didn't know why the patient was there, and I was scared that maybe he was there because he had fluid in his ear. I was scared the doctor would ask me those things. My hands were stuck to the paper on the exam table. I thought about leaving. I thought about it enough that I stood up and looked at the doorknob.

I just wanted to fix my ear. Not answer those questions. I couldn't answer those questions. It was a good thing my ear hurt so bad that I could think about that instead of thinking about those questions.

The doctor didn't ask me any of that stuff. I guess the other guy had something besides ear fluid.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sanitation Engineer,

Throwing away old sex stuff is sad. It's not like you can reuse it. I mean, I guess you could. But that doesn't sound like a good idea. And we're not talking about family heirlooms here.

Best,
Pete

Dear Brothers in Arms,

The other day I pulled out an old video game. It only took part of one level before my eyes filled up with tears. I couldn't figure out what was going on until I closed my eyes and heard the video game's music. Then I turned it up really loud. It wasn't the prettiest music ever. It was an old game, the one where the two guys have guns and fight aliens, the one we played all the time when we were kids. But hearing those sounds, I could remember those times when we played together.

I remember what it felt like, anyway.

The three of us close around the TV, fighting those things off. We were just kids, but that was okay because it felt like we could do anything. If we could fight off a whole invasion of alien robots, what could beat us? It felt like maybe, no matter what else happened, we would be okay. All we would need is each other and maybe some bandanas.

I don't know if I thought an alien invasion would really happen. I didn't know what we'd be fighting off when we got older. All the things we'd have to fight against.

I don't know what I expected to fight, but I was ready to fight anything.

What I didn't expect is that we'd all be fighting so far apart.

Best,
Pete

Dear Shortstop,

Did kids where you grew up talk about the bases? Like instead of saying you kissed a girl, you would say, I got to first base?

I didn't get it. I didn't like baseball. Not as much as I thought I'd like kissing girls.

There's problems with the bases thing. Like how you can steal a base in baseball, but I'm pretty sure that would be wrong in being with someone. Or how in baseball you can't skip any bases.

You never hear about a baseball player who maybe has a rough patch, and then he decides he's comfortable being at second base for a while. He wants to get used to being at second base again before he starts thinking about going home.

Maybe that happens in baseball. I don't follow sports too close.

Best,
Pete

Dear Subscriber,

A magazine at the store had a picture of a woman on the cover. The magazine said she was the Sexiest Woman Alive.

She was okay. There was nothing wrong with her. But the picture of her not smiling in her underwear? Not all that sexy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Exploded,

When something explodes, it can still hurt you even if you don't get knocked down or have a piece of metal through you. This guy explained it to me. He said that you can be near an explosion and not feel anything. But it still pushes out this wave that moves really fast through the air. Even if you're protected from most of the stuff, the wave still moves through your body. And different parts of you get hurt when the wave hits. Maybe the wave hits your heart. It hits your heart and stretches it out one way, then smashes it. Or your brain. It pushes against one part of your brain while it pulls on another, and it's like having someone squeeze your brain.

An explosion can hurt you, and you might not even know it for a long time. You might feel fine. You might even feel really good because your body puts a lot of stuff into your blood when an explosion happens because it wants to give you extra energy so you can run away.

What happened though is that you got smashed and stretched at the same time. Your body was tight and then loose, your different parts all feeling different things, every little part of you hurt a different way.

Your body can handle a lot of things. It helps if it's just one thing at a time, though.

Best,
Pete

Dear Octogenarian,

The other day I went walking in the city. I love doing that. You see all sorts of stuff, especially if it's a Tuesday when everyone's at work.

This time, though, my stomach hurt. And my legs didn't feel too good either. I tried some water because sometimes I forget to drink enough water, but that wasn't the problem.

Thinking about being old. How this is what old feels like. How I won't want to walk around the city anymore because my body hurts too much.

It's such an easy thing, walking around. Something that anyone should be able to do.

On a long enough timeline there's nothing so small and simple that it can't be taken away.

Best,
Pete

Dear Warning Ticket,

A couple weeks ago the brake light went out on my car. I figured it was probably a burned bulb.

The problem was I had to see which bulb was out, but it was hard because I couldn't pump the brakes and stand behind the car at the same time. There's one bulb on each side, and each bulb has two filaments, one for regular lights and one that lights up when you hit the brakes. So both bulbs worked in park, it was just when the brake happened that a problem showed up.

It took me a spell to hit on wedging the ice scraper between the driver's seat and the brake pedal. Then I could see right away which bulb.

When everything works like it's supposed to and it looks like everything is alright and you have a few things you need and some stuff to fill your time and you're getting along with people and your clothes fit okay and your car runs, you can make it by yourself. When everything works like it's supposed to, you don't need anybody. You don't need someone to pump the brakes.

Best,
Pete

Dear Patriot,

This story is hard because it starts kind of stupid.

In World War II, Captain America falls into the North Atlantic Ocean when he tries to stop this huge missile.

Hang in there. I told you this starts stupid.

What happens is, Captain America rides on top of this huge missile that's set to blow up America. He pulls it apart a little and then he falls off and hits the water. It's so cold he freezes in a block.

Stupid, right? Wait, don't answer that. Just stay with me.

Some people find him and they wake him up, but not until after the war is over and so is the next one and maybe even a couple others. It's a long time. He's back alive, but his partner is dead. His friends are all dead. Restaurants are different restaurants. They probably don't even make the kind of pen he liked anymore. Everything he knew is gone.

When you're in a comic book it only takes one mad scientist having a really good day to take away everything.

Lots of stupid stuff happens to Captain America. He was a werewolf for a while. He punched out a lizard man who was Richard Nixon in disguise. There's a Cosmic Cube.

But there's some stuff that's not stupid.

When someone dies, the people who miss them have to be sad about it. But for Captain America, his friends lost him and they were sad. And then he lost them back. That's not fair. That's dying twice.

Losing someone. It should only be sad for whoever is left. You should only have to die once. You shouldn't have to spend a lifetime frozen in a block of ice just to die again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Barber,

You probably don't remember, but I bring in the same picture with me for every haircut. It's a folded piece of magazine that has a regular guy with a regular haircut. When you look for pictures of haircuts, almost all the haircut pictures are famous men who have nice hair and nice faces and nice clothes. I can't bring in a picture like that. I don't want to say, "Make me look like him."

I don't know what I would do if I ever lost my haircut picture.

You probably don't remember, but every time I unfold the picture ,you look at it so fast before you make a cut. Then you dig in,

You probably don't remember, but every time, while you cut my hair, you tell me how to use a blow dryer. I listen and try to say I'm listening with my eyes in the mirror so I don't nod. I don't say that I've never owned a blow dryer.

And the whole time, under the haircut cape, my hands fold and unfold the magazine picture on the same fold lines. Over and over. The fold lines are white and cut right through the man's face.

You probably don't remember, but every time you ask about hiding the scar on the back of my head.

You must not remember. You ask every time.

Last time I said, "I don't care. It doesn't matter."

And you said, "Yes it does."

Thank you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Inhuman,

There's this comic book I read a while ago called The Inhumans, and it's about weird mutant guys. Their leader is called Black Bolt. He looks mostly like a normal guy, but he has a voice so strong it can destroy things. If he whispers he could break apart all the buildings in a whole city. The Inhumans, what the Inhumans say is that he could crack the whole Earth in half if he talked in a normal voice.

Black Bolt has to be really careful. Because what if he had a nightmare and said something in his sleep? He might smash someone's house. If something jumped out and scared him and he said something, he could crumble down a building with a really nice deli in the basement. If something hurt him and he said SHIT he could explode somebody into dust and they'd be gone.

It's hard to be all the way quiet. Just for a day. If I don't talk to anyone for a day, I'll start talking to myself. Just telling nobodies what I'm doing. Okay, let's get up and take a shower. Okay, let's just get in a load of laundry and then we can go turn on the stove.

What's even harder than staying quiet is the first word when you start talking to the real kind of people again. After telling yourself to stop, after sitting so long with your mouth closed, after a long enough time of letting your ideas die before they get to your throat, the first word feels all wrong. It's hard to make words right with your sleepy lips and your tongue draped over your teeth. You can't.

Most of the time my first words when I talk again aren't anything special. It's because someone asks me something and I just say Yes or No or Fine, Thank You.

Even then, though, it's scary. Even then it feels like the world might crack in half.

Best,
Pete

Dear 401k,

The bank sends me this thing in the mail about retirement. There's a part that says Thank You For Planning Your Retirement With Us. There's a chart with lines that show how much money goes in. There's a thing where it says Your Retirement Age Is.

I don't want to tell you the number for that. It's old. It's really old.

I have a really good imagination. One time, when I was a kid I drew a comic book about a guy who had a housefly for a head. Even if I still had all that imagination, I couldn't imagine being old as the number on the bank paper. What it would feel like. What I would look like.

The bank sends lots of papers and charts. None of them have lines for how much my old man legs might hurt. They don't show anything about how maybe I'll want to take up a fishing hobby or something else that old men do. How I'll want to be out in the garage all the time doing whatever it is that old men are always doing in the garage. They don't say if I'll be by myself or have someone with me.

It doesn't say much about anything I want to know about.

If they put in some of that stuff, that would be really nice. I would like that. If they said how maybe I'll have a dog or not, or maybe I'll be more of a cat person. They could say something about what I'll want to do all day when I'm that old. They could say something more, something to help me with imagining more.

They don't know for sure what will happen to me. But they don't really know about the money either. It says on the chart that everything is just a projection. They could say that about the other stuff too, the cat or the fishing, that it's just a projection. Even a projection would help pass the next 50 years.

Best,
Pete

Dear Rook,

There's a story about how games were invented in a place called Lydia. They had a famine in Lydia, and they were in big, big trouble. What they did is eat every other day. It was a good plan except they had to figure out what to do the days they couldn't eat. So games. One day they would eat, the other day they would play games. On the days they ate, they weren't allowed to play games. On game days, no eating.

Kind of a stupid plan. Checkers is okay, but not as good as pizza.

They ended up doing that for eighteen years. For eighteen years, game day then eating day, back and forth like that. They made it through eighteen years on half food.

They invented a lot of new games. They invented dice. And the ball. The ball, can you believe it?

I try to think about what might help me get through to a time when I'm not lonely anymore. With being alone, you don't even get to have one day with someone else and then one day away. That would be easy. Instead, you get one day alone, then another day, and then you're really not sure how long it's been.

I figured out how to change the oil on my motorcycle. And I read a lot of books. And listened to a lot of music. And talked to my brother more. Got to bed on time. I even got a book that teaches you how to have nice handwriting.

Those people in Lydia figured out a way to make it through. But does anyone really think they wouldn't have traded all their inventions, their dice, for a large pepperoni, extra cheese?

Best,
Pete

Dear Vilain Petit Canard,

The teacher in kindergarten read us The Ugly Duckling book, and to read she would lick her tongue and turn the pages. She had a geographic tongue. I didn't know then that's what it's called. What a geographic tongue is, it's where your tongue has big, deep cracks in it. Like someone cut it with a knife, but the knife didn't cut all the way through your tongue meat. The gross geography of my teacher's tongue didn't matter the day when she read about the duckling. I was excited anyway. She had to keep telling me to sit Indian style, not up on my knees. It was okay for her to lick her fingers with her geographic tongue as long as she could turn the pages fast so we could hear about this duckling.

What would the duckling do? How would he deal with being so ugly?

It was a book. I thought maybe he would have an answer.

I do that. Think how maybe there's some answer that I just haven't thought of yet. That someone will explain it to me.

You know how that Ugly Duckling turns out. How the answer is he wasn't ever ugly.

I was crushed.

Me and that duck, we were in it together. Then he went off and turned into a swan and everyone said how handsome he was. He figured out the answer to being ugly. The answer was, Don't be ugly.

I was sitting in the circle with the other kids, and I looked at their faces. I wasn't a baby something who was going to grow into a different thing that was supposed to look like how I looked.

Here's how that story should go:

It would be better if the Ugly Duckling grew up and then he was an Ugly Duck. And some of the ducks called him ugly, and they were assholes. The book should call the mean ducks assholes because that's what those kinds of ducks are. It's okay to say Assholes when you're talking about someone like those mean ducks. Even in a little kid book.

Sometimes the Ugly Duck called himself ugly, and that was a lot worse than the asshole ducks saying it.

Then he'd be an Ugly Old Duck and that would be okay. He did good at being an Ugly Old Duck because pretty much all the old ducks are ugly. He was used to it already. He didn't have to watch his looks go away.

He didn't get pretty. He just got okay with being ugly. And he wasn't alone because he was nice and funny.

That's a way a lot better story for kids who think they're ugly. And for the asshole kids who make fun of them. Trust me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lost and Found,

This girl I knew would talk about how she wished she could go into a room and inside would be all the stuff she ever lost. Everything she misplaced or left behind somewhere, all of it just stacked up like it never left. She could get back her keys and single mittens and probably a big pile of change. The change isn't all that exciting, but still a nice bonus.

It's a weird fantasy. Sure, there'd be some good stuff. It would be pretty sweet to give my brother back his watch, the one I was so careless with. And to get back my book that he threw in the trash because it was in his locker and he didn't want to carry it home on the last day of school.

Some of the magic finding room, some of it would be bad. Some of it is stuff that got lost because I didn't care about it anymore, didn't think I needed it anymore.

Seeing you again is kind of like that for me, like the magic finding room. I get to walk into a room and see all these things that I thought were gone forever. Your tall boots and your legs inside your tall boots. I thought they were gone. But here they are. Not all the way gone. Just gone for me.

That's the thing with the magic finding room. It works a lot better when the missing stuff is stuff. Junk. Crap. Garbage.

Best,
Pete

Dear Absentee Spoon,

I couldn't always get comfortable spooning you. Now all I can do to fall asleep is put my arms around a pillow and pretend you're there.

Is this why people have so many pillows? For pretend?

My pillow is a boxy, doughy version of you. And I'm sorry, you must have suffered a terrible accident that took all your limbs. But when it's late and I can't fall asleep, even something that's not all that much like you, even something that's boxy and doughy, even that's better than the real you right now. Because it's next to me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Animal,

There's this thing I saw in a book once. It said that if a man turns into a beast, he won't have the problems of being a man anymore.

Maybe some animals wouldn't be so bad. If you're a grizzly, you can hide and sleep a long time. And people forgive you your violence.

Or a horse. If you're like a horse, you can be strong, and people understand that you're sometimes not happy if you don't have things to do, work that matters somehow.

You can try and do it, make yourself into a beast instead of a person. Your problems might not go away, but they might turn into problems you like better.

The hard part is that I don't think you get to pick. You turn into a beast or not. You might end up a beast you don't like very much.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mr. Sun,

Blaming you for my burnt skin isn't really fair. You give plenty of warning. At my age, with my skin, I know better.

Still, this burn hurts like hell, all up and down my back, right in between my shoulders.

When I put on sunscreen, I knew I couldn't reach the middle of my back. I never could. My arms don't bend like that.

I could have asked someone. The people I was with, they would have helped me at the middle of my back. I know they would have. They're my friends. But I wouldn't ask. It's too much to have strange hands on my back that way. I don't think I could ask anyone to touch that part of me.

It's okay that you burned me so bad, Mr. Sun. We've done this before. Your hands never ask. Your hands hurt me in a way I'm used to.

Best,
Pete

Dear Choke,

My motorcycle kept dying somewhere between the clutch and first gear.

For the good things about that bike, a bad thing is that it takes a while to warm up.

With motorcycles, some have a choke, and some have an enricher. They're almost the same thing. They do the same thing, really, mess with the mix of air and fuel. A choke cuts down the air, which means the air and fuel mixture is more fuel than air. The choke does its work by cutting the air. Restricting. Choking.

An enricher adds more fuel. It's almost the same thing.

There's a little difference, though.

The enricher does its work by adding. Putting in more.

Either one, you can use it to help the bike warm up when it's cold. To make that death between the clutch and first go away.

Enriching, adding stuff. Choking, keeping stuff back.

With a motorcycle, they're almost the same thing.

Best,
Pete

Dear Talk Radio,

I really needed talk radio for a while. It was like having conversations, the same people in my ears every day, but they didn't ask anything from me. I guess some people probably don't like that, wouldn't consider that a conversation. I liked it. I was out of things to say, but that didn't mean I didn't want other peoples' voices around me.

Me and the radio people could eat whole meals together and I didn't have to say anything, and me being quiet didn't make them upset.

We could drive and drive and drive and I didn't have to say a thing.

They always did what I wanted to do. If I wanted to go for a run, we went for a run. If I had to go to the hardware store, they came with me. Grocery store at 2 AM. Airplane to Pennsylvania. Whatever you want, Pete.

Those are the good things.

Bad things. When we cooked together, the voices never got excited when a piece of salmon turned out good, flaking off the bones. They didn't ever wake me up in the morning to sit on the couch under a blanket. They didn't really know the things I needed to hear sometimes, and they mostly didn't say them.

Radio wasn't talking. Radio was a voice in the room.

Radio wasn't a new tire. It was a spare, limping me to where I needed to be.

Best,
Pete

Dear Completion,

There was something that used to be really exciting about finishing stuff. I would try to do it all the time. If there was a coloring book in front of me, I colored all the pictures, even if there was one of a princess or a nature scene that I didn't care about. If there were comic books I liked, I wanted to read all of them.

I tried to tape all the episodes of the Spider-Man cartoon from when I was a kid. I thought if I had them all there, on tapes, in order, that it would make me happy. To have them right there whenever I wanted. To complete the set and see every time Spider-Man beat Dr. Octopus and every time he missed a date with Mary Jane because Hydroman was up to no good again.

With you, there was something about me that wanted to be a collector again. To hear all the songs you knew. Read what you'd written down. I wanted to know your friends and the people you liked. I wanted to sleep in your bed so many times that I knew everything. I wanted everything, all of it.

When you try to tape all the episodes of Spider-Man, there's a problem. The problem is that you want to tape everything, but it kind of makes you want them to stop making new ones because it's pressure to tape something. You can take a collection and put it in a jar and screw the lid on, but if the thing you're collecting changes and grows you have to get out the jar and open it back up over and over again. The thing is never done.

Spider-Man was the best when I didn't have to tape it. When I could just watch it.

You were the best when I caught you doing something with your hair I'd never seen, or when something reminded you of a story I'd never heard.

That part. Right when you started in on a great story I'd never heard. Goddamn it. That was the most exciting thing for me. When there was this whole new thing to collect.

And at the same time, I just wanted to be finished.

I couldn't enjoy the things about you and collect you at the same time. And I didn't know which one I liked better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Martha,

Someone at my work showed us a new furniture plan for our building. It's not something I'm good at. My place is so small, there aren't a lot of options. It's less about decisions on where to put the bed and more about figuring out which arrangement lets the doors swing open all the way.

My bed has a full-sized spare tire underneath it. This is how I use space. I wasn't a whole lot of help on the furniture at my work.

What they showed me is that when you arrange furniture, you have two things. You have the pieces of furniture, let's say a couch and a table. And then you have the space that's made by the couch and the table. The space was always there, but when you put the couch and the table in there, it creates another square of space. A new empty space gets made out of the full space.

You have nothing. Then you add some stuff. What I don't get, the part I'm not help with, though, is how do you know if you're really adding anything to your life or if you're just giving better definition to what's still missing.

Best,
Pete

Dear Babymama,

My mom has a bunch of stuff in her garage she's saving in case me or my brother have kids. Legos. Old books for kids who like science like *Bats Can See in the Dark* and *Ducks Don't Get Wet*. Action figures piled into hugs and wrestling poses for decades now.

It's been a long wait for my mom.

I wonder if she's a little disappointed every time things don't work out with me and a girl. If she thinks about my girlfriends being moms the way I do. If she asks those questions in her head.

She never mentions it, but it's okay if she feels like that. She gave me and my brother a lot when we were kids. Far as I can tell, the only things she kept for herself were those boxes of stuff in the garage.

Best,
Pete

Dear Permanence,

My grandmother did New York Times crosswords in pen. The New York Times crossword puzzles get harder every day of the week. So Monday is easy and Sunday is the hardest. The people who make those puzzles know that Monday should cut everyone some slack. Sunday morning, you're ready for something to take your mind off Monday again.

It might take my grandmother most of the week to get through Sunday's puzzle. Most of a whole week, those grey and black boxes on the kitchen table. Always filled in with pen. Once in a while, a row of letters would be lined out, smaller versions of my grandmother's normal letters scratched in above a pile of ink. But no pencils.

I don't have much use for pencils either. I keep one around to make marks on walls or wood, where this screw should go or how long that board should be. But that's it.

Seems to me that erasers don't work like they say. The stuff that's erased, it's not gone at all. It's still smudged, something else over top of it. The paper bruised and weak in that one little spot.

I'll say this for my grandmother.

Monday, Tuesday. Even Wednesday, I can see getting through Wednesday's New York Times crossword on pen. But Sunday?

Lady had guts.

Best,
Pete

Dear Teller,

This woman from the grocery store told me about how to put a deposit on happy. She said she put things on scraps of paper and slipped the scraps into a piggy bank. She called it her happy bank, and she said she called it putting a deposit in the happy bank. Or she called it a down payment on happy.

I think I bought too much vegetables that day because it took too long to check out and the grocery store lady talked a lot.

But still. I wanted to try. The happy bank was too much for me, but a list was a good start. Foods or movies or little things that almost always cheered me up. I put the list away in the top drawer of a file cabinet. For later. In case.

When I needed it, I got it out from my desk. It was shorter than I remembered. Everything fit on one yellow Post-It square. And my writing is big. None of the things helped right then. How was I supposed to lay hands on good barbecue at that hour.

I looked at the Post-It, and I called the grocery store lady a cunt.

That helped. Calling her a cunt for her stupid idea. Calling her a cunt and laughing because I got to call her a cunt when she was trying to help. She was someone's mom probably, and I was calling her a cunty cunty cunt head, and laughing laughing laughing at this cunt with her stupid happy bank and her deposits into her 401K(unt).

When I think about it, when my mouth builds the little cushion of air at the top of my throat to push the word out, it still gets me laughing.

So thanks, cunt.

Best,
Pete

Dear Beauty,

It's June, hottest June I can remember, and I thought I saw snow all over the interstate.

I thought it was snow for about a half a minute. Until I saw the burst mattress. Then it wasn't snow. It was all wadding or stuffing from a burst mattress that flew out of a truck bed and dusted the road behind.

The snow was something pretty. It was a piece of winter in the summer. Then it was trash. When I thought it was snow, it was so pretty. When I knew what it was, it was still pretty.

I don't care if something's trash anymore. If trash makes me happy, I'm happy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Home,

The red light stopped my car today. You know the one. On the highway, right where a person could decide to turn towards your house.

I was in the wrong lane, but hell, it wouldn't have been a big thing to cut across and punch it right down the back road. I thought about it. Thought about dropping the window and speeding up to the curve where the small engine mechanic has his sign out. Then around and towards town. Then, right before Main, swipe right and shoot behind the buildings, over the train tracks like you showed me. Then a right and a quick left. Then right, that place where I almost wrecked us on my motorcycle. Then the stop sign at the church. Then the first set of dips, and then the second, cross over on the right side where it's shallow, like you taught me. Then I'd swing around and park along the sidewalk, near the apartment where that guy in the wheelchair lives.

It all made sense in my head until the part where I got to the door. It made sense until I stood in front of the glass panels that let me see you before I heard the click. It made sense before you said hi and told me how the door was open and that it was never locked and that I could just come in.

Back in my mind, back on the highway, red light going stale, I knew how to do everything. I thought it all up, right up until that door, until I knocked and heard the dogs bark and waited to see you in the glass.

Best,
Pete

Dear Demo,

They're gutting my work.

It makes sense why they call it that. Gutting.

I walk through the work site sometimes, at night after everyone goes home and nobody makes you wear a hard hat.

The walls are opened up. Cabling spills down through the ceiling. The lights dangle from their wires, still turned on and casting spots of amber at whichever angle they've come to rest.

My work is gutted. Its guts are spilled out onto the floor, trailing down in long loops. Everything about the building that made it alive is there, outside the walls when it's supposed to be inside and protected.

The place we kissed is gone. It's not a place anymore. It's not a place where someday you could stand and say, This is where we kissed.

Maybe this is why it's good to kiss at places like the Grand Canyon or Mount Rushmore. You'll always be able to go back there. The Grand Canyon will always be a thing, long after you're dead and I'm dead and anyone who we could have bored with the story of a kiss is dead. The spot where it happened will still be the spot where it happened.

There are things that you think will be forever. I thought kissing you, I thought that would be forever. Then it wasn't, but at least there was the memory. I thought the memory would be forever. There's not a lot you can do to take a memory away from a person.

But it's happening. The carpet we stood on is torn up. The counter that was at your back is ripped from the wall. You're not here.

I fell in love with a woman who isn't around anymore and kissed her in a place that's gone.

Best,
Pete

Dear Parent People,

When you said I should get a dog, you said it different. You said that you don't call yourself your dog's parent. Which is good because that's a little weird. You said that you call yourself your dog's Dad Person. So not his dad, because his dad is a dog, but his Dad Person. Of people, human people, you're the one that's his dad.

I don't have any dog stuff though. A yard or stuff for him to do while I'm at work.

The way you said it though, that's more what I could do. I don't think I could be a dad. I'm not ready for that. But I could maybe be a dad person. Not a dad so much as a person who is more like a dad than anyone else who's around. That might be a start, at least.

Best,
Pete

Dear Book Lover,

People bring book donations to my work all the time.

Crime books come in a lot. Old textbooks are big too. Nobody knows what to do with old textbooks. Nobody wants to throw them away because they don't want all that knowledge to go away forever. But you learn that a quest to keep all the knowledge in the world is a waste of time, and you learn that there's some stuff we call knowledge that shouldn't stay around.

Once in a while, we'll get a death donation. The boxes are old. The books are older. The books, they're the kind where you can see the edges chipping away into dust.

The thing that really sets apart a death donation is that the collection looks almost random. As though someone walked the aisles of a bookstore with a scarf over her eyes, ran her fingers along book spines and placed volumes in a basket until she couldn't carry any more.

It looks like that because someone's whole life is in there. It's mixed up and faded, but it's all in there. All the stuff they liked, the things they learned about. You can tell it's a death donation because nobody just decides to get rid of Rilke and a manual for a 1985 Honda lawnmower at the same time.

When I die, please don't donate all of my old books to the library. I know these librarians. They look through the boxes and make little piles, and it doesn't take long before they start feeling like they knew the person.

Don't let some stranger find me out. Don't give me away like that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Holdout,

It's okay. You can tell me that six weeks without sex seems long. It seems like a long time to me too.

Just because it's been a lot longer than six weeks for me doesn't mean that six weeks isn't way a lot too long.

Best,
Pete

Dear Betty,

There's a secret to chocolate chip cookies, but god knows why it's a secret. You'd think everybody would tell everybody. We could eat great cookies all the time.

Most times when people make them, the cookies turn out hard. Stiff.

The trick is to quit mixing everything together so hard. Mix your creamy ingredients together and your sugars, just together. Then your eggs and vanilla. Again, just together. Then the rest of your solids. Just together.

Mix it up too much, bully the batter around the bowl until it's even and perfect, that's how you make a cookie tough. You think you're pushing it into what you want, but when that hard cookie bites back you won't be happy. Let the ingredients work, let them do what they're there to do.

That's really all there is to it. Pancakes are the same way. Perfect ingredients, mixed perfectly, total shit.

A lot of cooking is that way starting out. Most of your mistakes are because you can't let things happen. You open the oven door to check, and that fucks up the temperature. You take the lid off of something that should stay covered. Plates of hard, dry chicken come from a lot of worried, concerned, honest cooking.

Cookies are a great place to start. To start trying to not worry. There isn't too much to fuck up, and even a fuckup cookie isn't all that bad. Just remember that you can't force it, and that there's such a thing as too much checking in.

Oh, and for the love of god, buy a wire cooling rack. Five bucks. It's five bucks worth of difference, easy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jeweled,

There was a ring on the ground. I picked it up, got it almost all the way to my face before my fingertips caught on the grooves. Keyring. Not the kind of ring for someone's finger. Just a metal coil for keys.

Goddamn, I must be way past the age where it's endearing to know so little about jewelry that I pick up keyrings and hear wedding bells.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sentimental,

The other day at a diner my mom gave me the hospital wrist bracelet from when I was born. The one they put on me.

She had it in a white JC Penney jewelry box. The kind where you pull the lid off and there's a tiny cotton mattress inside. When I pulled off the lid, there was my mom's name, the way it was when I was born before she and my dad split. My name, still the same so long ago. The name of the hospital. All printed out and slipped under this yellowed plastic.

It wasn't cut. My mom must have undone the clasp and slipped it off my hand instead of cutting it.

She kept it so long. I don't know if she had plans that never came together or if it's just one of those things you keep.

She keeps other old stuff too. She had a big thing of Legos in the garage that she was saving for when me or my brother have kids.

I don't know what to do with the bracelet. I think I'm going to throw it away. Take a picture of it and then throw it away. I just don't have anything to do with it. Nobody to show it to. If your mom doesn't want your baby stuff anymore, you shouldn't want it either. You shouldn't hold it all different ways. Fitting inside the palm of your hand. Sliding it over your three fingers until it gets hung up just past where the fingernails grow out of the skin. You shouldn't read the names over and over. The hospital. My mom. Me. Hospital. Mom. Me. You shouldn't think about how it all used to fit.

Best,
Pete

Dear Music Fan,

I never finished the story about that one album I hated.

Last summer I helped my brother move. He's been all over, all over the world even, so the desert wasn't all that far. We drove there in a moving truck, towed his gold Volvo behind us. The radio stations all changed over four or five times, then we were there.

My brother saw his new place for the first time. No dishwasher was a surprise. Close to the coffee shop was a surprise too, but the good kind.

After driving so fast for so long and sweating into the rough bench seat in the van, after drinking sweet gas station drinks, everything was slowed down. We ate pizza outside on a bench. We ate without any plates or napkins. The hot pizza box was balanced on my legs. My brother said, "Can I get a slice?" every time he wanted one and I'd open up the box so he could cradle one out.

That night we rebuilt his furniture together. It was the kind of stuff where it was alright the first time you put it together. Then you took it apart and put it back together again and it lost a little something. The edges on the nightstand drawers wouldn't line up. The screw holes on the bookshelf were all stripped out and bleeding sawdust.

My brother's been so many places. Done so much.

After we got his TV stand together and he dressed his bed, we walked to the grocery store for lightbulbs and chips and beer. Two greasy boys walking the neighborhood together.

He told me how it was hard. How he didn't think he'd be this old and starting all over again. How he didn't want to be here.

You kind of grow up thinking your big brother is invincible. Then you figure out he's not. But you don't figure it out once and then that's it. You figure it out again and again.

I slept on the floor in his living room that night, and he slept in his bedroom for the first time. I thought it would be tough for me to sleep because the floor felt hard when I laid down. But the driving and moving and all that wore me out so bad that I didn't move all night, and when I woke up I had a long rash of carpet marks up and down the one side of my body.

My brother took me to the airport in the desert. He still hadn't showered. His hair roostered up in the back, but I didn't smooth it down when we hugged. I thought about it.

On planes I always pretend like I'm asleep because then they don't make you stop listening to your headphones. I was listening to that one album while the plane took off, and the music and leaving my brother on his own. I couldn't help it. It was waterworks. Not just quick, either. There were noises in me. I tried breathing, counting ten breaths at a time the way I do when I'm trying to stop from throwing up. I had to keep pretending like I was asleep when they came by with the little cart full of drinks.

That was the last time I listened to that one album.

He's still out there. My brother. I think he's alright. He doesn't say.

That's a really long way of explaining why I haven't listened to that album very much. I couldn't. Every time, I don't even hear the songs. I just ask myself over and over why I couldn't smooth his hair down.

Best,

Pete

Dear As Seen on TV,

At night the TV plays a commercial for this pillow that's made to be like the shape of a woman, a woman lying on her stomach. They said in the commercial that lots of guys like to lay down on their girlfriends' butts. They could use this pillow instead of a girlfriend.

You could buy one in leopard print.

We never did that. I didn't rest my head on your butt.

I remember laying down across your legs. I remember when you pressed on my back, even though I didn't want you to because it made me fall asleep. When you would press out cursive words between my shoulders with your fingertips and I had to guess what you were spelling. My name. Your name. Other words. Penelope. Fart. And then you farted. Home. Sex. Words that weren't Sex but that's what I guessed anyway.

Maybe I missed something, not laying on your butt. Maybe the pillow people are right. But it's okay. Even if I can't lay across your legs anymore, and even if you don't press your words into me anymore, at least I still have the ones from before. You don't touch me with words anymore, but the words are still here.

Best,
Pete

Dear Nurse,

The hard part for me with dishes is getting started. I have a drink, and then maybe another one just to make sure there's something to do while I make sure the first one took. By the time my fingerprints are wrinkled up with water, I'm banging around stacks of plates, shoving them into cupboards.

The drinks make doing dishes go fast, but some of my plates are starting to chip.

They're not that nice, the dishes. It's okay if they get chipped a little.

But they'll stay chipped. And when you come along and see that all my dishes are chipped, and when you ask why, I'll have to tell. I'll have to tell you how I was sad and that maybe all those drinks didn't make me feel less sad, but made it feel like I could at least do the little things to keep going. Like dishes.

I won't be like this forever. There's a day where I'll listen to the radio balanced on the kitchen windowsill and put the dishes away right.

But those dishes will still be chipped up. Even though most of everything will start being more like normal, there's some of it that won't get undone ever.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fifteen Year-Old Girl Post-Breakup,

Sucks.

What sucks is nobody takes you seriously. They say you're 15 and it doesn't matter and So Many Fish.

There are so many fish. But a lot of them are mutated. And are we counting fish that live deep underwater and look like floating monster skulls? Because no.

I still remember. What it was like to be young. And heartbroken. All I did one summer was lay down on a shitty 70's couch and listen to bands I won't even talk about because they're too embarrassing. A whole summer like that.

Okay, fine. It was Staind.

Let's make a deal.

I'll try and keep remembering. That couch and that music. How it felt to want to cry and not want to cry so I could be a man. I'll remember. Because it's not like a broken heart doesn't hurt bad when you're 15. It's just that when you're 30 you don't remember.

I'll remember. I won't make it seem like it doesn't matter with bullshit about fish.

You remember that, remember how I tried. And when you're 30 and you're standing with a sad 15 year-old girl with clothes and words you don't understand, try and remember too.

Don't forget.

Best,
Pete

Dear Heartbroken Men,

Thanks to all of you who did something good with your heartbreak. The songs and the books and whatever else. I'm sure someone out there made a version of just about everything because of heartbreak. Probably people don't know it, but they might be cruising in a car built by a man's worst break up.

It's hard to be a heartbroken man. It's a full-time gig.

Best,
Pete

Dear One-Third,

Someone told me that if you take how much time you were with someone and divide it by three, that's how long before you get over it.

So if you were with someone for three months, it takes one month to get over it. For three years, a whole year.

We were never even together, so that math means it should take zero time to get over you.

I'll check the numbers again. I'm having trouble working this out right. Because I still want you to come out of the other room and make me put down my pen and come to bed.

Best,
Pete

Dear Dusty,

I walked around the outside of my old elementary school. Some of it I could remember when I saw it. I could remember the huge metal grates we had to stand on before we could go inside in the morning. I could remember how we had erasers on chains around our necks like dog tags. I remembered some stuff, but not very much.

It would be nice if when memories go away, they would turn into something. A little dust. Maybe a little dust would come out of my ears or something, my nose. Maybe I would forget a whole lot some day and then my eyes would be red from the dust and forgetting.

All this stuff you did, all these things you were, and then they're gone. Just gone.

Best,
Pete

Dear Always On,

Did you hear the one about going to a funeral for a sixteen year old boy?

It goes like this.

It was the first time since I'd bought a suit that I had to wear it to dress something sad. Sad suit fits different. Sad suit is hot and tight. Every layer pressed against me, trying to stop my lungs from filling up. Sad suit has layers and layers and layers.

My friends, they all looked nice too. Spring. Spring dresses, the sad kind of spring dresses.

The service. They almost didn't mention him. The dead boy. Just the bible and what the bible said. The dead boy was born a long time after the bible. The bible didn't say anything that reminded me of him.

The bible stuff happened.

Then we left. We walked out of the door that was between where the dead boy was and where the whole rest of the world was, all of it bright and opening again the way it does in spring. All of it happening no matter how dead that boy could get laying there.

In the car, I took the long way back. One of my friends needed a minute for crying.

My friends kept saying, Maybe he did it because of this or that.

They kept saying, It didn't make sense.

They kept saying, He seemed so happy.

I kept not saying anything.

I don't know if there's anything worse than a boy's funeral. I miss him very much.

I didn't say it in the car, but I thought about laughing a lot.

You made me laugh before when I didn't know if I could, or maybe thought I didn't want to. That time I was hurt so bad that I even went to the doctor, you made me laugh when I didn't want to, when I had to hold my chest and my stomach and try to stop it happening. You made me laugh before I was all the way done trying not to cry that time. That noise that came out, it was a laugh. I don't care what you say.

I can't laugh today. On the funeral day. It's not in me.

That doesn't mean you can't say anything funny, though.

If you can make me laugh tomorrow, though, I can probably make you laugh on the next day. Or try anyway. If we're funny enough. We can't be funny enough to make it alright. But let's try. We can't be funny enough, but we can be funny. It's the only thing I can think of.

Knock-knock.

Best,
Pete

Dear Compass,

The museum has preserved pieces of a guy's inner ear laid out in a brown box on a piece of felt. It's like a tiny cave inside that guy's ear. Inside my ear. They even call one part The Labyrinth.

It made me laugh to think of saying, My Labyrinth is infected.

I knew a kid once who put an ant in his ear. I don't know where it went, but inside an ear seems like a bad place to get lost. Maybe that's why they made it so twisty, so ants won't get to anything important in your head. They spiral around in the dark and then they give up.

Then you think about how words wander through there. Stuff that's supposed to get through to the end. To get all the way inside you.

Stuff you said, some of it got lost in my Labyrinth. Sometimes I'll remember something sweet you said or how you asked me for something and it's like it all got lost and was wandering around so long that it had time to grow and grow and now it's so big.

You asked me one time to buy you special shoes. The green ones. When you said it, I thought you were talking about shoes you liked. The words, they got lost in my Labyrinths so long that now is when I figured how you weren't talking about shoes you liked. You were talking about shoes you wanted me to like and shoes you wanted me to like enough to give them to you. You were talking about us liking the same thing.

Some things still stumble around in there. They might not make it in, make it to the important parts. I'll listen for them to come home.

Best,
Pete

Dear Grieving,

Sorry about my reaction when you told me about your mom.

"That sucks" is what I always say when someone tells me something really serious. I was raised on too much Bill and Ted.

If it helps, I don't say "that sucks" very much. The only time I say it is when I just don't know what to say.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tunnel Vision,

Last night I went to a party. There were girls there. Nice girls.

I tried to be nice. I tried to think about what it would be like to go home with one of them. But it didn't even work.

Every time I opened my mouth to talk, I turned to see if you were there and maybe I could hold your hand. Every time I tried to talk to someone about how her family was from Dubuque, I wanted to ask her about your family, as if this new person would know.

I want you with me. Even at a party that's packed full of nice girls.

Best,
Pete

Dear Haunt,

Do you believe in ghosts?

That's a stupid question to start with. Sorry about that. I won't ask if you believe in goblins or trolls or something.

I'm only asking because I think I sort of believe in ghosts.

When I wake up, sometimes you're here. And when I talk, sometimes you're in my voice. When I smell this one laundry smell, you're there too.

I never see you, and I don't think anyone else would feel you, but I do. I know you're here.

Maybe someone took that kind of ghost, the real kind, and turned it into all the stuff from Ghostbusters and all the other ghost movies. You don't fly around in a sheet. But you're here. You're here with me.

Your ghost doesn't scare me. But it feels so unreal. It makes everything from before seem unreal.

I miss you so much, and when your ghost is gone, that will be everything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Preserved,

There's this thing called the Glacier Effect. That's what a therapist would call it. I call it the Timmy Effect.

It's like this. My mom ran into this guy I knew. We went to school together all the way from Kindergarten. We were friends then, and then we weren't friends later. Not in the way where we had a fistfight on the basketball court. We just didn't do sleepovers and stuff anymore.

When my mom told me about it, she said she saw Timmy. I didn't know who Timmy was. He'd been Tim for years. He was taller than me. In high school, him and this other guy would leave during lunch and do blowjobs on each other. Timmy was gone.

The Glacier Effect is where your last memory makes up the way you think of someone. For them, stuff is still happening, but in your brain it's like this person is frozen in a glacier, waiting until you run into them at the store and thaw them out again.

I have a glacier version of you now.

The glacier version of you isn't the way I want. You're all twisted up in there, and maybe some sad and maybe some angry and I don't like seeing you there, but you're behind the ice now. This glacier you is what I get.

I don't want to punish you and leave you in the ice. But it's like this:

Every time you come out of the ice, it's worse.

I'm sorry. And I hope it's not too cold in there.

Best,
Pete

Dear On/Off,

I heard this story once about a little girl who couldn't feel pain. A real story. She was born like that. Nothing ever hurt her. It took her parents a long time to figure out what was wrong because she seemed happy most of the time. She was always cutting and bumping and twisting up parts of her, but they just thought she was clumsy. They didn't know it was because nothing hurt. Nothing told her to stop.

I thought that would be kind of okay to do that. If you could make pain turn off. Maybe sometimes you'd have trouble, like maybe you'd forget about how you haven't had a drink of water since two days ago. Maybe things like that would feel weird, but it wouldn't hurt.

No matter what happened, you wouldn't have to worry that it would hurt.

There were times in my life that I would have done anything for a switch to turn everything off.

But right now, right now I think it's good I can't turn it off. Because I would turn it off, and once I did that I'd be afraid that it would never make sense to turn it back on.

Best,
Pete

Dear Victim,

There's this guy who does a bunch of TV shows, those crime shows where they tell you about real criminals to watch out for.

I remember my mom said that the TV guy's son was kidnapped, and the kidnappers cut the kid's head off. That's what started the TV guy chasing after criminals.

He's been doing it so long, his son would be old if he was still alive.

I don't want to be like the TV guy. Nobody wants their son to get his head cut off by kidnappers. That's not what I mean. There's not much point worrying about that.

What I mean is, I don't want to be like him, to have a terrible thing be the biggest thing about me. To have the worst thing that happens to me set up everything that happens after that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Table Buddy,

Flirt. What a crap word. It sounds like you're doing something that doesn't matter at all.

Flirt. How to touch someone. Just a little. The side of your arm and the side of my arm on the table. Close.

I wanted to flirt with you. It was important.

Best,

Pete

Dear Watchful,

Thanks for worrying that I was driving to see my ex when I took a right out of the parking lot that night. I wasn't. Her house is that way, but I didn't go there. I didn't even go by there.

Thanks for the worry, though.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jealous,

You're right. Going on a trip, the way I can just leave home, it's really cool. You're right. I'm a free man.

But free man only works if you don't have anything to come back to. Which is the same as saying you don't have anything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ranty,

I went out with a girl. A new girl. We drove away from her house and there was a shoe in the road.

That thing you had about shoes in the road. How street shoes were always single, lone shoes in the street.

I heard the rant a hundred times.

We'd be driving, there's be a shoe in the road. Sometimes I would see it first, but I never said anything. I waited for you to spot it. Watched your face.

You'd open your mouth and your eyebrows would go up. "Shoe! Shoe!" And then you would ask me over and over if I saw the shoe, like it was a unicorn or something.

I would say that I saw it, and then your face would change again, to outrage, to eyebrows angled down and your bottom lip pushed out.

You'd say how it happens all the time. You'd ask who was losing all these shoes. You'd say that nobody ever noticed but you. You'd say how it made you crazy that these shoes didn't make anyone else crazy.

I loved your shoe thing.

The new girl I picked up, she was really nice and we had a good time at dinner. But she didn't make me laugh. And it's not fair, but when I saw that shoe when I was with her in the car, I didn't say anything. Just watched her face. Waiting for up eyebrows. The bottom lip. Watching her face for yours.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mihami,

I drove past our breakfast place.

It was the first time since we split that I wanted to do something we used to do. I wanted to go to breakfast with you like I used to.

I'm still mad. I'm still not ready to hear your hand knock on my door.

I'm not ready to eat breakfast with you. But I want to.

Best,

Pete

Dear Huckleberry,

It was romantic and also not romantic how I thought about you today.

I'll start with the not romantic part.

I was driving home from the mountains and got stuck because it snowed. I wanted to come home so bad, but for a couple of hours the cars weren't even moving, and I was still really far away. So I decided to stay a night where I was stuck.

It was a nice place. It would have been really good if you were with me. It wouldn't matter to me that the weather made me stuck. But you weren't and I wanted to be home.

I had dinner and some drinks and then I walked up to where they say Doc Holliday's grave is. Or where the trail to his grave is. It's a half mile up this little trail.

It was dark, but I had my boots on and I made it up there no problem. I couldn't read any of the signs to find Doc Holliday and tell which of the graves up there was his, but I followed all the footprints in the snow from earlier that day. Doc Holliday's the only famous person buried on that hill. His grave was where all the footprints went.

It was quiet up there. No light except from the town way below.

I know I shouldn't still think about this stuff.

I thought how if I asked you that big thing people ask each other, how if you were with me, maybe I would do it right there.

Okay, none of that is the romantic stuff. It's a cowboy grave. I know.

The romantic stuff is how there was a while where everywhere I went, I thought about how good a place it would be to ask you the big thing.

The romantic stuff is how everywhere I went, all the places started to sound like a good idea.

Best,
Pete

Dear Onion,

I used to be scared that I would never call someone the love of my life. I didn't think that was a real thing. It sounds like a thing from stories where people kiss frogs and houses are made from gingerbread instead of bricks.

Then I got more scared I might find the love of my life and things wouldn't work out.

That's scarier.

I hope there's not another layer that's even worse.

Best,
Pete

Dear Worries,

People don't know this about me, but I worry. I can't stop. I don't worry about things like a comet hitting my house. I worry about the last mouthful of gas in my gas tank. I worry about how much water I drink ever since my brother had a kidney stone.

The time you went out to lunch and didn't come back until late, I worried about if I should go to bed or wait another ten minutes. I waited on the couch and read and then watched TV. My foot rubbed this one corner on the coffee table. Not on purpose. I just started, and then I was so used to it that I didn't want to stop. My foot hurt before you came home, but I couldn't stop.

My grandma bought me a worry stone at the museum when I was a kid. She knew I worried. I asked her my worried questions about what if we crashed the car in the rain or what if bigger kids chased me on the way home from school. The stone was smooth and flat with a little dent in it for your thumb. You rubbed it when you were worried.

I never thought about it before, but worrying is kind of the only thing that works. If you think about a river, it rubs and rubs on all the rocks, and that's what makes them smooth and different from the rocks that aren't from the river.

I lost that stone before very long because that's the kind of kid I was. But I'm pretty sure I could have worked all the way through it by now. On the couch, an ear out for your car.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lady,

The last time I broke up with someone I got really lucky because we ended up being friends. That's lucky because it worked out, but it's also lucky because it meant that I could take a little time and then say some of the nice things I didn't say to her before.

This won't be where I try to mend things or patch things up. I just didn't like how we left it, so I want to say a couple last things that were better than the last things I said right when we broke up.

I was happy that you seemed so satisfied with what I have, which isn't very much. I was happy that you liked my family so much. Mostly though, now I can see how hard you tried to convince me you felt like that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mrs. McFly,

I ran away down another aisle when I saw you at the grocery store. Ran.

The safest aisle was the one with all the vitamins and stuff because I know you don't bother with that.

I was afraid if we got too close it would be like in this one time travel movie where a guy goes back in time and sees himself, and then both versions of the guy explode because two things from totally different times aren't supposed to see each other.

I was from the past. From the time when you and me went to the store together. You were from the present, the time we don't go to the store together or go to the same house.

I didn't want to explode. Or explode you either. I knew you wouldn't really explode if you saw me, like into a million tiny pieces or something. I wasn't as sure about me.

Best,
Pete

Dear St. Pauli Girl,

There's this place by my house where I tried to find girls to date. Someone at work told me to play the field because you have to play the field before you can settle down.

At the place where I played the field, they have 100 different beers. They have them on a big list, and if you want, they give you a pocket version list so you can check off all the beers and try all the different ones. If you try them all, they give you a t-shirt

Doing the list of beers seemed like a good idea. I thought maybe then I would have a better taste for beers and then I would be able to tell people what beers were really good and what I liked about them, or how I didn't like a beer because it didn't have quite enough of this or that one really important ingredient or flavor or something.

Some of the beers were okay, and some of them were really gross. Not gross, but there are things about beers I like and they didn't have any of those things.

After a while I stopped all the different beers. I would be sitting with a new beer, some weird thing from Latvia or Estonia or some other place I thought was a made up country from comic books until here it was. I drank this beer from a country I didn't even think was real, and what I really wanted was the same beer I always liked.

The beer I liked, I didn't like it just because I didn't know anything about beers. It was the one I liked because I liked it, and it didn't really matter what other beers were out there.

The only reason I liked those other beers is because of the ways they reminded me of my favorite.

Best,
Pete

Dear As a Mouse,

When you sleep next to someone, their sleep noises, those are the noises that start to mean quiet. When I could hear you breathing just a little bit, that's how I knew everything was quiet. Maybe that's what's different between quiet and silence.

Quiet is the place where I get to hear the things I want to hear. Your breaths. The noise of them, that's quiet for me.

Silence is just no noise and nothing to hear, and when it's silent you reach out with your ears until there's something there. It used to be you, but now they have to reach far. All the way out to the trains that pass in and out of the east side of town.

Best,
Pete

Dear Time Crunch,

I stayed at home for a while. On Fridays and Saturdays. Good movies and fancy potato chips from the organic store. Bad movies and different fancy potato chips from the organic store.

Then I thought it would work better to go out all the time because staying at home didn't work. On Fridays and Saturdays, beers and friends or a place where there was someone with a guitar and nobody could tell I was there by myself.

Somewhere in the middle was right. Staying out sometimes, but going home a little earlier and a little less drunk was right.

None of it makes me miss you less. It just gives me less time to miss you. It packs the same amount of missing into a smaller box.

Best,
Pete

Dear Potential Sponsor,

People say that it's hard to say if you're drinking too much. Until there's trouble.

The other night I ordered takeout food. Then I got in the shower and I was having a beer in there. Shower Beers, I call them.

I know. Really good name. I'm a genius.

Then I had another beer when I got out. This would be a regular beer, not a shower beer. See, there's a whole system here.

And there was a whiskey in my hand when I remembered how I ordered that takeout hours ago. Hours ago drunk is hours and hours and hours ago regular. The food place was closed.

I went there the next day and told them what happened. I didn't tell the whiskey part. Or the beers part. Just the part where I didn't pick up the food that they made for me. The man who works there all the time, he wouldn't let me pay for the food I never picked up. He said I was a good customer. He even said he had some egg rolls that got made by accident, and before I could stop him he went in the back and bagged them up with the different sauces and he gave me the warm bag of food they didn't make for me, but they gave it to me anyway.

I couldn't tell if he knew there was something bad. I just told him I forgot.

I don't want to go back there anymore. So that's trouble. It's not bad trouble, but it's still trouble.

Do you think with drinking too much it matters how much the trouble is?

Best,
Pete

Dear Ms. Clean,

I cleaned.

My car was first in case I picked you up. I cleaned your whole side of the car, and then vacuumed out the chair on your side and the place where your feet would go. I was so worried about your side that I forgot to clean mine. My side was still so dirty it looked like someone cut a dirty car in half and then they cut a clean car in half and then they stuck the two halves together.

The next thing was the living room, in case you came to my house. That would be the place where we would sit and talk. If we got through the car part and you came home with me, the living room would have to be clean.

The next thing was the bathroom just because if we sit and talk long enough, maybe you would have to use the bathroom.

The next thing was the bedroom. Just in case.

The next thing was the kitchen. In case you stayed past the car and the living room and the bathroom and the bedroom and then still wanted to stay some in the morning and have breakfast with me.

Inside the bathroom closet. On top of the shelves where I keep camping stuff. The drawers in the nightstand. All that stuff could have used a once-over. But that's wishful thinking.

Best,
Pete

Dear Marked For Life,

People say it's a really bad idea to get a tattoo of your girlfriend's name or your wife's name. Because what if she leaves you? Or you leave her? What if she dies?

That's kind of dumb, though. That's like people who say a tattoo is a bad idea because some day you'll be old and a tattoo of barbed wire around your arm looks really stupid when you're old. But the tattoo doesn't look stupid when you're old. It's your body that changes. If the stupidest thing about my body when I'm old is a tattoo, that's fine.

With someone's name, I don't know. When they leave you, that's the bad part. Being without someone. You can't get rid of that either. You can't even cover it with long sleeves.

Best,
Pete

Dear Security Risk,

Since you left I got really bad about the deadbolt. I get up in the morning and see I forgot to lock the door. All the time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pitch Perfect,

Sometimes when someone calls my name just right, I can hear you. I can remember you and hear what you sound like. Just like when you used to say things to me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Trikes,

What I like about the couples I know, the ones who get married and maybe have kids and do all that stuff, is when they don't make me feel like a third wheel. Sometimes they must want to go out by themselves, I'm sure. But they let me come with them sometimes.

I don't know if that'll last forever. I don't want to wear out my third wheel welcome.
But after that's gone, I don't know what's left.

Best,
Pete

Dear Girl Going By on a Bicycle,

You looked so good on that bike. Then you got off and started walking it, and then I had too much time to think about all the stuff that probably wasn't as perfect.

It's too bad you didn't just keep going by on that bike. Just passing by, that was the right amount. To stop, even for a minute, made our relationship just a tad too long.

Best,
Pete

Dear Girl in the Car,

You didn't have to be embarrassed that I caught you singing at the stop light. It was kind of my fault. I don't know why I looked at the other people in the other cars while we sat. Most times I don't do that.

You can keep singing. I didn't know you, and I still don't know you. I won't tell anyone. I don't know who I would tell.

I hope you only stopped until the light turned green again.

Best,
Pete

Dear Doc,

You're the only horse vet I ever met. Far as I know. You don't meet a lot of horse vets when you don't meet a lot of horses. I only rode a horse one time, and it was the kind where it walks through the woods on the same trail every day, and you could probably be asleep the whole time and you would wake up right where you started and you wouldn't even know if anything happened while you were passed out.

I've known only two grown-up women who liked horses a lot. It seems like every little girl likes horses, but then they stop liking horses, or maybe stop talking about liking horses.

I like that you still like horses. But also you take care of them, so you like them in a grown-up way too.

I wanted to ask you a lot about horses, but I didn't know I'd meet a horse doctor at a dinner thing. I didn't prepare any questions.

Mostly I wanted to ask about the horses that pull carriages downtown. I hate that. Maybe the horses don't mind it as much as I think, but I would hate to walk around in the city with cars honking at me all the time.

I wanted to ask if you think horses hate it.

I wanted to ask about what you thought about having your own horses sometime.

Then I would ask you about some other stuff, but I wanted to ask if you maybe wanted to find a place where we could live and then someday we would kidnap the horses from wherever they make them stay downtown, and then we would let them live at our place, and they could do whatever they wanted and they would never see another bus again for the rest of their lives and we wouldn't either.

Best,

Pete

Dear Relocator,

I was happy to help you move. I would do anything to spend time with you. If you said to come over because you wanted me to clean your microwave, I have my own sponges and brushes.

I saw your underwear in one of the moving boxes. I didn't do it on purpose. It was just there. I kept not picking up that box because I thought you would do it.

Part of me wanted it to be something that wouldn't be a big deal because I'd seen your underwear so many times. But part of me wanted it to stay a big deal because if I got bored of your underwear I don't know what would be the point of anything.

Those were the parts of me. The all of me tried not to think about the underwear balled up in that box and how it would look when it was on your body.

Best,
Pete

Dear Dreamy,

Sex dreams don't visit me very much. When they do they're always about you.

I like the dream part of it. It's the after that's hard. When I wake up sore as I would if the sex was real and only happened half way. Where I finish the sex by myself because otherwise it hurts too bad.

It goes from sex with you to me just touching myself to get through the day.

That's first thing in the morning. The rest of the day is pretty shit.

Best,
Pete

Dear Time Bandit,

This book said that if you think about it, everything that happens is already in the past.

It takes a little time, a really, really little time, for light to travel to your eyes. And it takes another really, really little time for your brain to understand your eyes. And it takes another really, really little time for your brain to make you understand. All these really, really little times add up. By the time you know anything or feel anything it's already happened.

I think about it like everything already happened, so everything is okay. There's not much that you can do about any of it, so it's all okay.

And I think about it another way too. I think about how if everything is in the past, then maybe there's not much difference between the stuff that's just a little bit in the past and the stuff that's a little more in the past. The difference between a little bit in the past and more in the past doesn't seem like much.

So the difference between now and the times you came home with me is really small. Almost like it's still happening.

Best,
Pete

Dear Weirdo,

My brother said “Could you do me a favor and not date someone where you have to warn me before I meet her?”

Best,
Pete

Dear Uncle Scrooge,

What everybody says about how money doesn't buy being happy.

Everybody's wrong. We would have been a little happier with a little more. Money wouldn't have bought all the happiness we needed. But a little money would have got us a little closer.

Best,
Pete

Dear Regular Maintenance,

I cut my nails when we were together. I did better with that when I thought about what my hands would feel like for you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Caretaker,

A couple friends let me sleep in their guest bed after I got out of their car and threw up in their driveway from drinking.

They live in this house that's a house for real adults. When I woke up in the morning there was a big plastic cup of water next to the bed. I looked around in the bedroom to make sure I didn't throw up. Every time I sniffed my nose, I smelled throw up. But I looked and looked until I figured it must be throw up that was still in my nose.

I walked down the stairs past all these pictures of my friends and their families, their wedding, their dogs, and I was carrying my boots because they were covered in my vomit.

I hope you have good friends for you too.

Best,
Pete

Dear Escort,

Today I uncovered my motorcycle and checked the tires and cables and stuff. It'd been a while.

When I got back on the motorcycle, it was hard to remember. There was so much to do with all my different body parts all at once. You have to brake with one hand and one foot. Do the clutch with the other hand. Shift gears with the other foot. It's a whole lot to do all at one time, and it took me a while to get back to where I could remember how I did it before, to make it feel like something I could keep up with.

That time you drove me home and I was drunk and you asked if I needed help inside, I pretended that all you were really asking was did I need help getting inside. I was scared that I couldn't do all the things you're supposed to do with someone else anymore, that it had been too long.

I didn't want to be rusty forever, but I liked you a whole lot and I was scared to try and remember with you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Catalyst,

I drove my brother home when he was really drunk last night. He called me and I said Okay.

Today he's okay. He said last night that he was so sick on the ride that he wished we would get in a car accident so that we'd have to stop driving.

That's kind of how I feel on a date now. I kind of hope there's a kitchen fire in the restaurant so we can just both go home and it doesn't have to be anyone's fault why it didn't work out.

It's a stupid way to think. A long way to go for relief. Like a drunk wishing for a car accident.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lusted,

I went to stay the weekend with an old friend in the mountains. We made beer. We walked his dogs every day.

We took the dogs up a set of train tracks that ran through a valley near my friend's house. He said the train never came that way anymore, and even though it was snowy and windy I wasn't worried because we would have heard the train from really far away if it decided to come.

We turned around after a long time. It snowed in our faces on the way back. The dogs were off their leashes. They ran past us on the train tracks. Then they'd peel off into the bushes or a stand of trees. Disappear into the falling snow and then come back. They always came back. Then one dog came back and the other one didn't.

We walked over a lot of the track without ever seeing the missing dog. I thought maybe we should go back and call for him, but my friend said, Don't worry. My friend said, He'll come back.

My friend said one time he was walking that same dog when it wandered off, and when my friend got back home the dog was sitting at the front door.

We walked some more, and going back into the weather it was a lot colder. The wind and the blowing ice cut into our faces, made the walk long. Maybe that's why my friend held the leash and he wound it around his one hand, then unwound it and wrapped it around his other hand. Maybe that's why he started to get worried.

He stopped a couple times and called his dog's name. He turned his head to shout and the shouts went right in my ear, but I didn't say anything. I wanted to find the dog too.

When we stopped to talk about turning back, the dog walked out of the snow between the two metal rails. Out of the snow and the wind with its head way down.

My friend talked to his dog low and close. The dog knew.

Sometimes you have to decide that stuff. Walk further and trust your companion to show up. Or turn around and look where you've already been.

Best,
Pete

Dear Nostalgic,

My parents split up a long time before I saw the pictures from their wedding.

I saw the pictures when I was grown up. When I came over to my mom's house to move some flagstone, there they were. These two black and white photos, nailed up on the wall.

One was my parents and their moms walking down a busy street in Chicago. The buildings looked so tall, and my grandmas were both dressed fashionable. Like Jackie O.

My mom was in a dress, but not a wedding dress. More like a summer dress. I wished the pictures were in color so I could see the colors from my mom's dress.

My dad was in a short sleeve button-up and a tie. He had on this hat, one he still had when I was a kid. It was bright blue, and on the sides, right above the ears, were two big lightning bolts. They were sewn out of stuffed animal material, and they came up and above the hat, like Hermes.

He was wearing the hat in both pictures, and probably he wore it at the wedding too. At the courthouse when they got married.

My mom was really smiling big. You could see all her teeth, and she looked more happy than I've seen in a while. She was shorter than my dad, and in the picture she was looking up at his face and smiling.

Something like that hat might make some people upset because it's like, Can't you be serious for one thing ever? He wasn't serious that way, my dad. I think being serious for things like that made him uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable, anyway.

In their summer clothes, maybe that's what my mom wanted. Maybe she looked at this man and his goofball hat and she thought how these were all good things to have in her life and they were all for her.

Best,
Peter

Dear New Year,

This year, for New Year's, I stayed in and wore my sweatpants. The ones with the hole in the crotch big enough to stick your thumb through.

This year, Our Year of the Hole-y Sweatpants, this year still wasn't as bad as the year me and you went to bed early and you promised to wake up at midnight and kiss me. Even if I wasn't awake. You promised you'd kiss me until I was. You said that would happen. You threatened me. You promised.

Best,
Pete

Dear Lady in My Head,

When people go out and one of the people is me and one is a woman who isn't married, a whole romance story happens in my head.

We had to split up in cars and she got in my car. A coffee cup rolled out from under the seat at a stoplight. She laughed. Then she reached her hand under and pulled out two more coffee cups. She set them in my lap. A joke. The best kind of joke where her hands touch all over my thighs.

We got to the dinner place and she sat next to me. She kind of made a big deal about it. Rearranged the whole table so her chair was the one next to my chair. When someone said she's just trying to sit next to me, she said No Shit. She said that in the romance story I made.

Then we got back in cars to go somewhere else, but she said she didn't really want to go to the bar and could we just hang out together.

Most of the time when I get there, to the real place in real life, the one that's not from my romance story, there's no way. The girl shows up with a boyfriend who I didn't know about, or she gets in another car, or she'll tell everyone she's going to drive herself because she has to go home early anyway.

Sometime that night, when I'm driving in the car myself or sitting next to someone who didn't want to sit next to me, sometime in there I think, You need to stop building it up so big in your head.

Then the romance story says, But that's the only kind of romance story I get. The romance story from my head is the only kind that's perfect.

Best,
Pete

Dear Second,

I can understand why that guy left his wife for you. It makes sense. You're the kind of person that men leave their wives for.

That's a terrible kind of compliment.

Best,
Pete

Dear Cinephile,

People say dinner and a movie is a good date. I don't think that's true.

Popcorn is my problem. I have a complicated relationship with popcorn.

I can't stop myself. Something about popcorn means I have to eat it really fast and eat all of it. It's kind of gross.

If I don't get popcorn on a movie date, it's because I really like you and don't want to be a popcorn monster in front of you on our very first date. I would think about it, though.

If I do get popcorn it can maybe mean I don't care about the date anymore, so I'll be a popcorn monster and not worry about it because the date is already bad.

If I do get popcorn, it can also mean I like you a whole lot and I'm comfortable. I think maybe you'll like me even if I turn into the Incredible Popcorn Hulk.

Best,
Pete

Dear Minesweeper,

I read this thing about a place in Korea that's so full with land mines and stuff that it's almost a nature preserve. Nobody wants to walk in there and nobody can remember where they put the land mines or where it's safe to walk.

I flipped down the sun visor in my car. A bunch of your pictures slipped out and fell in my lap. I pinched them in there so long ago I didn't even know they were right next to my head, I didn't know to be afraid.

It's been so long, but the traps are still deadly.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fashion Plate,

It was nice running into you today, except you had my shirt on. The green one with the buttons near the neck. The one that was almost too small for me and then it was big on you except the arms were short.

Is that shirt still mine anymore?

Best,
Pete

Dear Timelord,

Daylight Savings was right after you left. It took me almost three months to change my clock. The same clock we wrote on with dry erase markers to mark when we could take the stuffed peppers out of the oven.

Daylight Savings was never a big deal before. But it didn't feel right that things like Daylight Savings could still happen without you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tablespoon,

For a while I made cornbread from this recipe. I had it down. Until it got all messed up.

I don't bake much. You have to be so exact. It's more like chemistry than anything, and I sucked at chemistry in school. You had to have the right number of all these different things in chemistry. Protons and electrons and stuff.

Anyway, I was trying to figure out where the cornbread was going wrong, if it was the corn meal or the protons or the electrons. I followed the recipe all the way right over and over because I knew it worked before, and over and over the corn bread was all wrong. Hard and low.

Even when you're doing something right it can go wrong because something small changes. That's why baking is so hard. Did you know that you should turn your oven on to four-hundred degrees and then put a thermometer in there and see how close it really is? Because it's almost always a tiny bit off. That's one thing I tried to fix the cornbread.

If you keep your oil above the refrigerator, it can be warm from the motor on the refrigerator, and that changes what happens when you mix stuff together. I moved everything around in the kitchen to make sure nothing was in the wrong spot.

I figured out my cornbread problem. After a bunch of pans of bad cornbread, I figured out it wasn't the recipe or the corn meal or protons. It was the measuring spoon.

I bought new measuring spoons. And when I looked at the new ones next to the old ones, when I put the new tablespoon next to the old tablespoon, you could see how the old tablespoon was warped.

I might have ground it up in the disposal one time on accident. Okay, forget the might have on accident part. It was an accident, but there's no might have about it.

Sometimes a thing just stops working and you can't figure out why. You have to try a bunch of different stuff to figure out what's wrong.

Something easy as cornbread can get messed up by something as small as a spoon.

Best,
Pete

Dear Senior,

I was behind this old couple at an art thing when the wife of the couple said to her husband, "Sylvia is directly to your right."

They turned to Sylvia and shook hands and said hello. I didn't understand why the wife said it that way, so official. Almost like the husband hated Sylvia and the wife wanted to warn him that here she comes.

The old couple walked around to the different paintings together. They stood really close. Her hand on his back, almost around him except her arm was too small.

The wife described a painting to her husband. Her version was short. Way less than a thousand words, the number they say is right for a picture. When the wife was done describing, the husband said, "What is it called?" That's when I figured out how he couldn't see right.

He didn't have a cane, and he looked in the right direction for things. Maybe he could see just a little, but not enough to know that the person next to him was Sylvia or what a painting had in it.

They walked around really close together with their arms hooked so she could help him around the room and so he didn't run into anything. Every time, she would say a few words about a painting and he would ask what it was called.

He must be disappointed by a lot of the stuff at art museums because so much of it is called Untitled.

To be that next to someone. If you fight or if you're mad you have to still stand close. Hook Arms.

To know your wife's hands and her fingers. Her sweaters just by the cuffs. So much touch.

Best,
Pete

Dear Socialite,

I never felt scared in a group of all new people when you were there with me. Your hand on my back, right above my belt. Never pushing. Just letting me know.

Best,
Pete

Dear Swinging Single,

After my dad divorced his second wife he moved into a bachelor pad. I didn't know what a bachelor pad was then. That's just what my mom called his crappy apartment.

My dad's bachelor pad was third floor, so hot during the day. There had to be fans in every room. He had one box fan up against the window, and it was so hot my dad would lean right on the fan's wire cage to cool off. Until the whole fan, it punched through the screen and fell out the window. My dad almost tumbled out the window with it, but he caught himself and caught the fan cord too. I ran downstairs where the fan dangled above the ground. My dad unplugged the cord from the wall and lowered the fan down to me by the cord. I carried the fan upstairs and we talked about it for a minute, then plugged it back in and waited to see if it worked. It did. The blades spun. Then waited more to see if it worked, but of now it worked in a dangerous kind of way.

That's the kind of stuff that happened at my dad's bachelor pad.

I convinced my dad to buy a really cool comic book poster for his bachelor pad. He hung it right above where we slept in sleeping bags.

One time, on a weekend we were with my mom, someone shot a gun in one of the other apartments where my dad had his bachelor pad. The walls were so thin the bullet went through three different apartments, exited the last one and went outside.

The only thing dad cooked in his bachelor pad was spaghetti. He would put all sorts of different things in it. Sometimes it worked out and surprised everyone, like the time he put canned clams in it. Other times it didn't work out. Like the time he put smoked cocktail wieners in it. He tried that more than once. He was still riding the high from when the clams turned out so good. He wouldn't give up on the cocktail wieners.

My dad's bachelor pad was fun and just a little bit dangerous and the food was different and also the same.

I didn't know it then, but I know what a bachelor pad is now. It's the place you want to live when you're 14.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bjorn,

I don't think I want to be a dad. I don't want another kid to grow up how I grew up, but I don't know how to stop that from happening either.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bed Bath and Beyond Worker,

The longer I spend alone, the more pillows that end up in my bed.

Not for under my head. Just around me. I know a lot of people fill up the bed with pillows and then throw them on the floor when they're sleeping, but I put mine on the sides of me and sometimes wrap my arms around one. My shoulder sometimes hurts when I sleep on my side, but if I wrap my arms around a pillow, that fixes it.

When I went to the dentist the last time they asked me how many pillows I slept with. I guess that has something to do with how your jaw works. I don't know. I told them two because I figured they were asking about head pillows. Maybe they weren't. But I think that they can fix my teeth without knowing all about my pillow collection.

Best,
Pete

Dear Watchdog,

When I wear big sunglasses and don't shave for a day, I see my dad.

Maybe my dad used to look in the mirror and see his dad. I don't know. His dad died when I was little.

My grandparents came to Colorado and stayed with us. We ate hot dogs. My grandmother took us out to find nice rocks while my dad and his dad stayed at the house. Our grandmother knew a lot about rocks, so making a good rock collection was important in our house when she came to visit. We didn't see her much, so we had to find the best rocks and make her remember us.

My grandfather died almost right after that visit.

My dad said it was cancer, and instead of doing anything about it or letting the cancer kill him, my grandfather stopped eating until he died. I don't know if that's true or not. That's what my dad said.

We went to the funeral and we had to dress up in nice clothes, I think for the first time ever. It was the first time I'd ever been inside a church.

Part way through the funeral my dad made me get up from the church bench. We walked to the back of the church. My dad's brother was back there. My dad's brother had to carry something, and my dad had to carry a big thing filled with those church crackers, and then someone handed me a really big glass full of wine. I'd never carried a glass that big before. It was a huge fishbowl in my hands. Nobody let me hold wine before. I was really scared I was going to spill it on the church and on my nice clothes.

I wonder if my dad sees his dad in the mirror anymore. I wonder if he remembers.

I wonder if I really look like my dad or if I just don't remember.

Best,
Pete

Dear Joiner,

The thing that's nice about jogging is that you don't have to look after anyone else.

If you pick a thing like going to the art museum to be your thing, people will want to go with you. But then you can't go to the art museum the way you used to. It's different. You have to explain everything. Check in. Did you like the painting of the boat? Are you hungry?

If you pick reading for your thing, people will want to read with you. Or take you to the bookstore when what you want is to read books and not buy books.

Jogging, though. Nobody ever hears that and wants to get in on the action. It's kind of like if your hobby was, I don't know, cleaning out cat boxes.

Nobody wants to jog with you. It hurts. Your legs hurt and your breaths hurt. It all hurts.

You might have to hurt yourself if you want to really be alone for a little while.

Best,
Pete

Dear Crybaby,

I'm pretty good at crying now.

When I was little I would cry a lot, and then every year I would cry a little less. But then in my 20's I started crying maybe every season or something, and that's been about the regular now.

It mostly happens in the car when a sad song comes on. Maybe not a new song, but one I don't know very well, and then I hear a part of it that sort of sounds like how I feel right then. Someone saying it through the radio makes me think, Oh shit, everyone can tell.

In the car is the only place I cry. Mostly when it's dark because then none of the other cars can see you. I'll drive around and around my house in big circles because I'm not ready for the cry to be over yet.

The tears are so big on my face sometimes that I start to wipe my face with my hand, and my whole face is wet. All around my eyes and my cheeks, and then my jawline and my chin. I smear it all around on my face, and then there's tears spread out on my neck and even above my eyes.

People say it feels good to cry, that you feel better when you're done. But that's not true for me.

I don't cry because I feel better after. I don't stop because I'm ready to feel better.

If my car never ran out of gas and the night never ran out of time and I didn't run out of water in my eyes, I don't think I'd ever stop.

Best,
Pete

Dear Nanny,

Whenever my friends have babies they disappear.

It's not like the way it was before your friend had a baby. You go over there to hang out, and that part is the same, but after you have a beer someone has to give the baby a bath and put it in another set of clothes and lay it down in a crib and wait there until it's all the way asleep.

My friend had a baby and that's what happened.

I tried going over late sometimes, when the baby was in bed. But we were too loud and the baby woke up, or maybe the baby was ready to wake up anyway, but then my friend's wife had to get up and try and make the baby sleep again, and I think she was mad. I don't know because I didn't call my friend after that. And he didn't call me much anymore either.

Best,
Pete

Dear Innovator,

I have to say, there are some really good things about living alone.

Coming in and taking my shoes off. Right away, first thing. Right in the doorway. That doesn't work when you live with somebody else because when they come home, they don't want your shoes in the middle of the damn floor.

One roommate I had made us have a shoe basket. I hated the shoe basket so much.

Alone? Take your shoes off wherever you want. It doesn't matter. If you don't want to have a shoe basket, then fuck the shoe basket.

Other things about living alone, they're not so good.

I got used to making big meals and freezing them, which is good. But when I would put them in the microwave, sometimes they wouldn't thaw out all the way, and then I would eat them anyway because I didn't really care enough to heat them, stir everything, then stick it in the microwave again. That's a bad thing about living alone. You should be nice to yourself with food, even if no one else is there.

Or sometimes I would drink coffee from the day before, or even from two days before. It was grainy and coated my throat with this bitter film. You just need to wake up sometimes, so any coffee is okay.

With someone else here I would take the time. I would make new coffee even if it meant I had to get up early, or that I was a few minutes late to work. For someone else, I would do that. For just me, it wasn't worth it.

I would use a dryer sheet twice instead of once. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing or something anyone would notice or not. I think it works better the second time. Doesn't smell as much.

You get used to all these things, and you like how things work at your house, and then someone shows you a different thing. Sometimes it's a shoe basket, but sometimes it's something great.

One time, on accident, I left the fridge door open a crack the whole day, and the food inside got disgusting. Some of it was maybe okay, but I didn't know for sure so I had to toss everything.

This girl I knew then, I told her about what happened, and she said, You know, your fridge has little legs on the bottom, and if you unscrew the front ones a little they get taller and you can make your fridge so it always tilts back. That way the door closes all by itself. From gravity.

The fridge at home when I was a kid closed like that, but I never thought of how. I thought different kinds of fridges closed different.

That girl was right. The fridge legs unscrewed just like she said and then the fridge closed all by itself, just like she said.

Not all the ways other people do stuff are awful like the way it was with the goddamn shoe basket.

Best,
Pete

Dear Dental Hygienist,

Probably reading too much into it, but when there was nothing going on and I was in the dentist chair and you were in a stool next to me, my mouth full of tubes and you with your hands folded in your lap, thanks noticing that the bright light was still on my face.

Thanks for turning it off real quick after you noticed.

Thanks for doing that. Even after looking into the ruin of my mouth.

Best,
Pete

Dear Light,

The bulb in the bathroom was out, and replacing it didn't make the to-do list for a while. So I to-didn't.

I shaved in the shower, in the dark. When I thought I was done, I'd touch my face all over to see if I could find something I missed. There was almost always something, a patch on my cheek or a fleck of lather by my earlobe.

It was the most I ever touched my own face.

Everyone thinks a lot about what their face looks like, and about the kind of face they like to look at. I know I'm not that for everybody. That's okay.

What people don't think about as much is what a face feels like. When they touch it, how it will feel under their fingers.

I want you to see me that way. With your touch.

Best,
Pete

Dear Tickler,

It's hard to be a ticklish person. Nobody tough and cool was ticklish. John Wayne wasn't ticklish. John McClane wasn't ticklish.

Someone asked me how it works to be ticklish. When I'm with someone. WITH them, with them.

My sides and my stomach are always ticklish. But if I go a long time without being touched, more of me gets ticklish. Up higher, near my chest. Then my arms and legs, my shoulders. Then my neck. Pretty soon there's hardly a place left to touch.

Even my hands, the palms of my goddamn hands turn ticklish with enough time.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fire,

The mountains are on fire. The dry heat, not much snow, a little lightning and we've got a situation.

That's what they keep saying, anyway. All these natural things, they worked against us this year, made it a fire season to remember.

Some of it is our fault. Some of it is people want to live where it's pretty. It's okay. Everyone wants to live where it's pretty. I look out my kitchen window in the morning and see a cement slab, slices of cars shooting past through the dried bones of a bush. But it's not always like that. I've stayed places before where you could look out in the morning and see clean snow that won't melt for months. I've walked on the coast when the fog set in so heavy you could think how you'd only have to get a few feet off the shore before you'd have to make a decision about disappearing forever. I once camped in a natural crater older than almost anything and woke up with bighorn sheep near the tent, close enough to see the insects that followed them everywhere.

What I'm saying is, I get the appeal of pretty.

The problem is that we want pretty forever, without interruption, when what's natural is to burn. The fire is what fixes everything. It makes things ugly for a while, and then the pretty returns. It's hard that the pretty can't just stay, that it has to burn away and make room for a new pretty. It's hard that the cycle is longer than our lifetimes.

Little burns have to happen, though. A small flare-up here and there, a couple trees go down. A small fire burns and we talk to each other in ways we don't like to. A small fire burns and we lose something that won't come back. A small fire burns and I say some things that maybe I shouldn't, but they're the truth and if I say them now we might not have to burn down the whole forest to get at them later.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fight Fan,

Those Rocky movies? I love them. Even the bad ones have a good part. Like part four. That one's kind of silly with the robot and the Soviet Union. I usually don't get on board with that one. Until Adrian gives her speech about how she doesn't want Rocky to fight because she wants him around. That stuff was great.

The thing about those Rocky movies is that he always fights, but it's never a good idea. In the first movie he fights even though he could get hurt bad. He makes it through, but his eye is so beat up that in the second one he fights right-handed so that he can protect it. He's messed up pretty bad after that fight too, but then he goes and fights Mr. T. Who makes it even worse. And then Ivan Drago sends him home punch-drunk.

Every time he steps into the ring, he comes out with something that's going to make it harder for him to go back in again.

I think what we love about Rocky so much is that he won't stop. He fights in part IV when he lives in a mansion with his wife and son and he has everything. He fights in Rocky Balboa when he has nothing. I think we all want to be like that. Fighting even after we should stop.

Sometimes I don't know if I can fight again. Every time I tried to make it work, it didn't. And then when I left, some piece of me was beaten out. Something that helped me win the last fight isn't something I can use anymore. Every try chips away something. You're older every time and it takes longer to recover. A beating that would have been light ten years ago leaves you laid up. Every fight makes you a worse fighter until you think maybe getting back in there isn't what you should be doing anymore.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hunter,

In an old hunting magazine at the dentist's office there was an article where someone asked a really good hunter how people can keep from being nervous when they're about to shoot. It's really important to not be nervous because when you shoot an animal, you want to hit him in a certain spot to make sure he dies.

The hunter guy, he said that the way he got less nervous was that he did it three-hundred times. After three-hundred times he didn't shake.

You're only the fourth or fifth person I've asked out. If I'd known you were coming, I would have maybe tried asking a couple hundred more people first. To be more ready. So I wouldn't shake as much.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pizza Girl,

When we got that frozen pizza, I cut it into squares instead of triangles because that's what we always did with pizza growing up. My mom always cut frozen pizza that way because the pizza place she liked in Chicago cut pizza that way. I guess it's good if you don't like crust because you can just eat a piece from the middle. I always liked the corner piece best, though.

When me and my roommate would get frozen pizzas, we would cut them once, in half, and each eat one huge wobbly slice. I liked that too because it seemed so big, and I was always hungry then.

The truth is, I was about to cut the frozen pizza you and me got into regular, triangle slices. But I cut it into squares and pretended like squares was how I always cut pizza because I thought it would give us something to talk about. That maybe you'd think there was something to this guy.

Best,
Pete

Dear Farm League,

I like you. A lot. And I'd like to give this thing a shot.

Thing is, in case you haven't noticed, I've kind of had my heart broken. Pretty badly.

The good news is, I think it's well on its way to being on the mend. Thanks for helping with that.

The bad news, I'm scared because if I like you, which I do, and we try this whole thing, which I'd like to, I don't think I can take having my heart broken again so soon.

You can see the problem here.

If you can try and not break my heart for at least a few months, I think I could be ready. Right now.

Best,
Pete

Dear Aching,

I ran too far on Wednesday, and two nights later I couldn't sleep my legs hurt so bad. Everywhere. It was like someone was squeezing them. Squeezing through them. Pressed fingers through the skin and knuckles grinding into the muscle.

I walk the last part when I run most times. There's a spot four streetlights from my house. That's the new finish, and when I get there, I slow down and walk.

The walk part helps a lot. My legs come back more the next day. I can feel them under me more.

The other night, I called you before I went out to run, but you didn't answer. It's okay. You don't have to always answer. But when I was at the new finish, at the spot four streetlights away, I didn't stop. I didn't walk from four streetlights away. Or from two streetlights or one. I ran right up to my apartment door, unlaced my door key from my sneakers and unlocked the deadbolt. Then I walked straight to the phone to see if you called.

And now my legs are sore. Because I didn't walk like I'm supposed to. Like an old man. Because I had to check the phone right away. Like a goddamn teenager.

Best,
Pete

Dear Level 80 Wizard,

I saw this thing on the personal ads that says, "D&D free."

I honestly thought that all of a sudden people had a problem with Dungeons & Dragons. Dungeons & Dragons was the only D&D I knew about. It was confusing. Why all these people were so against board games. Why you would put that in your personal ad. How many bad dating experiences were people having because of some game about wizards and treasure chests?

It's extra funny that someone who didn't know the D's stood for Drugs and Diseases would have one of those diseases.

It's hard to know when to tell someone. You don't want to say it right off. That makes it seem like you expect to have sex right away. But you don't want to wait too long either. I don't want to wait too long, anyway.

This letter started with more detail. Science and research and exactness about what it means. But maybe you know that already, or you can find that out anywhere. What you don't know, maybe, is how I feel about it.

I don't feel like a monster. I don't feel like trash most of the time.

Those times when you're with someone and you give them an out. An ejector seat. You wrap their hand around a lever and say that if they want to pull the lever, the ejector seat is ready. If this isn't what you signed up for, you can pull the lever. If you like me, but not that much, you can pull the lever. If you're scared, pull the lever. I won't ask you why. I won't make it hard to leave.

The hardest part isn't telling you. The hardest part isn't seeing your eyes when you're let down, when another piece of the idea of me breaks apart and the real, imperfect flesh takes its place. The hardest part isn't telling you that you can leave even though I want you to stay. Stay with me for a long time.

The hardest part is thinking you might say it doesn't matter, but really it does. That you would pretend for me. That you would let me bring ruin into our bodies. That I told you too late.

It's okay.

Pull the lever if you need to. I'm not mad.

Just pull it now.

Don't Wait.

Please.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jogger,

Couples running together. A lot of times one person will be way out front of the other person. A lot of times, the two people, they'll have their own headphones and sunglasses on. A lot of times it's hard to be sure they're together. You can call it running together as much as you can call eating different meals at different tables a meal together.

I don't want to do that.

I want to hear what you say, or hear your breaths go in and out. I want to hear your footsteps. Talk to you. Your breaths in and out between words. I want to have you next to me. Not behind me. My neck can't take it to keep turning around to see you, ask you things.

Your breaths, in and out.

I hope we're somewhere around the same speed.

Best,
Pete

Dear Palmist,

Some of the lines on your hand didn't look anything like the ones from the palm reading book.

When you asked, What does it say?

When you asked that, I wanted to make up things. Things so the lines on your hand meant you'd have to love me. If it was written in your skin.

A line that forks at the end means that you'll be patient when I try to cook you things.

A line broken in the middle will mean that when I embarrass you, we can talk about it later and you won't make me feel bad.

A line somewhere on your hand that means you laugh at me sometimes, which is okay because sometimes I'm a person who gets laughed at, but that after you laugh at me you'll put your hand in my hand and make me remember that you like to be with me.

You asked, What does it say?

The only thing I could tell for sure was that we were on your couch, and your hand was in my hands, and you were looking for me to tell you something nice more than you were looking for me to tell you something true. So I did.

Best,
Pete

Dear Mom,

Thanks for the cookbook. I needed a vegetarian recipe last minute, and I found a nice one. For a nice girl. So thanks for the cookbook.

And thanks for all the other stuff. The stuff you helped me with so someday I could get a nice girl to sit at a table with me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Emily Post,

I got raised just a little polite. It's hard for me not to hold a door, even if it means a long stand and getting split from the people I was supposed to be with. Or if someone drops something, I go in to pick it up right away. The car door is a big one too. For men too.

Part of my polite is not asking for stuff. Someone might offer me a drink, and I'll say no just because I don't want them to feel like they have to. Even if I'm really thirsty.

I'm not great at asking for what I want. Sometimes I'm not great at taking something offered, even if I want it.

If I say no, don't take it the wrong way.

I really do want that glass of water. More than anything.

Best,
Pete

Dear Judge,

Someone from before told me that I'm not good at asking.

So here goes.

I take a book with me to the gymnasium. It's really important to take something like a book or headphones with you so nobody bothers you. I take both. Sometimes the headphones aren't even plugged into anything. I just stick the cord end in my pocket.

One time I took a book and then I forgot it in a locker. I was sure I left it there. Not like how sometimes you lose something and it could be anywhere. This one I remembered leaving there.

I was going to ask for it at the front desk the next day except the book was a biography of Andre the Giant.

The thing is, I'm too old to read about Andre the Giant. Or Jake the Snake Roberts or Rowdy Roddy Piper or any pro wrestlers.

I could have explained that I read lots of other stuff too, all that important stuff you're supposed to read. And then sometimes I read stuff about Andre the Giant. I do both.

But if you explain too much stuff, then it's even worse.

This is the part where I ask.

What I need from you is to make me feel like it's okay with you if I do stuff like read books about Andre the Giant. Because I do. But I don't feel like it's okay.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sleepover Buddy,

There's never been a possum in the wall here. Don't worry. That sound is just the pipes. We have radiant heat. If it's winter and you want your boots to be warm in the morning, I'll put them up on the closet shelf for you. The pipes go right by there.

That thumping waterslide sound is just the upstairs neighbor's dishwasher. Nobody's slamming on the front door. I swear my neighbor runs that dishwasher every night. Sorry.

When I start to get sleepy, sometimes I breathe loud. Not snore really, just kind of loud breaths, almost like a scuba guy. Wake me up and I'll turn on my side, and that helps. Don't worry, it's easy to wake me up.

Someone before told me that my heartbeat is really hard. I don't notice it, but maybe it's hard. I've never had someone else's, so I don't know how hard a heartbeat is supposed to be. Don't worry. I'm okay. Wake me up, put your hand on my chest, and I'll turn away.

If it sounds like I'm having a nightmare, I probably am. You can wake me up. You can touch my face. You don't have to, though. I'll want to hold onto you for a minute. Don't worry, I'll be okay.

In the morning, my neighbor will start his car. It's a loud car. I might say motherfucker. Don't worry, I'll be okay.

If you can get through all that, we'll be okay. And there's French toast. Really good French toast.

Best,
Pete

Dear Wall,

Before we met I slept in a twin bed pushed in the corner. I'd turn on my side and sleep backed up against the wall. It felt really good.

With my bed in the middle of the room, I can't do that anymore. There's no wall to go against.

My body hasn't figured it out yet. That's why it backs into you so hard. Pushes.

It's not trying to shove you out of the bed. Just pressing.

I don't need someone to be my rock or my sunshine or the key to a lockbox of my heart or any of that stuff. A few hours a night, when it's hard to sleep because I drank coffee too late. A few hours a night, I could use a wall.

Best,
Pete

Dear Moan,

You asleep next to me makes me moan when I wake up. Not big moans or porno moans. Just a sound that happens right where my throat and mouth meet, where it gets sore when I'm sick. Something comes out of there when I wake up and you're there and my arm isn't around you yet.

Best,
Pete

Dear Calamity Jane,

Is it weird that I want to learn how to ride a horse?

If we were old and I got a horse, would you be embarrassed because old men are either supposed to not have horses or have always had horses? Old men aren't supposed to get a first horse in their sixties, right? Would it be embarrassing for you when I took lessons to ride my horse? If I had to wear a helmet, and when you came with me all the other people in the class were kids? And even the kids, most of them were girls?

Would you be embarrassed if I wanted to call him Potato?

Do you worry about me embarrassing you as much as I do?

Best,
Pete

Dear Timex,

Late. I'm always late.

I care if I'm late. I really do. So I drive too fast, and I can't stop looking at what time it is. Every car on the road makes me mad because they don't hurry like me, so they're getting in the way and not helping me out.

When you get to the place you're headed, and you're late, the people there aren't happy to see you because you're late. It's not their fault. But you feel like you rushed so much, and then you rushed to be somewhere that people weren't happy to see you.

It happens at home, the late. At home, I'll start folding clothes, and before I'm done it's time to leave. But I finish folding the clothes. I finish folding clothes because I don't want to think about folding clothes when I'm with you. I don't want to have my mind be putting dishes away or taking apart the faucet handles to fix a leak, or looking through the aisles at the store for a new kitchen knife. If I finish, then I don't have to be those other places.

I'll be late. That's the bad part. The good part is when I get there. I'll really be there. All of me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Badger,

Thanks for barking and demanding pets when your owner got the door. It was good to have something else to look at when she opened the door.

She's so pretty.

It was just a door there, then it was her, and I wanted to kiss her and talk and cook with her and sleep next to her. All of that at the same time. All the way melted.

Petting you was when I could pull myself back into man shape.

Best,
Pete

Dear Partner,

The first time we had sex was pretty bad. My fault.

My first time with someone is always bad, always a contender for the worst, and almost always stays in the top five bad ones.

It takes me a minute to figure out what stuff from the last person I slept with was good and what was bad. Not bad. Bad for you.

This isn't coming out right. I don't want to make it sound like everyone I slept with is the same to me. They aren't. You're not.

I want to make things nice, but the stuff I bring to the table from the before people and the stuff that you bring to the table from your before people isn't the same stuff. It would work out great if we'd slept with the same people. Then we'd have the same stuff going on.

Actually, never mind. That wouldn't work either. Dumb idea. We can work things out without those weirdos. I wouldn't even know how to make those phone calls.

Besides, I can wait a little for it to get nice.

It'll get nice.

Best,
Pete

Dear Flower,

My hands still smelled like chopped onions from last night.

I looked up ways to get rid of the smell. Rubbed my hands with baking soda. And salt. And sugar. I would have tried the tomato juice if I had any, believe me.

I did everything I could think of. And even some stuff I never would have thought of. Scouring powder from under the sink. Vinegar.

And then you kissed my hands like normal. You didn't say anything. When I asked about old onion smell, you kissed my hand and kissed my hand and kissed my hand. The you said a metal spoon rubbed over your skin helps. Then hand kisses. Again. Again.

You did little things for me, little things to make yourself smell nice or look nice. Things I didn't even know most of the time. The tiny pencil you worked around your eyes. The way you sprayed perfume and walked through it. Things you did for you, for you and maybe a little for me.

The baking soda. And salt. And sugar. The vinegar and the scouring powder. And the tomato juice I checked for in the cabinets. It was for you. For my hands, for you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fuse,

My mom never says anything about the people I date. Until the relationships are over.

After I broke up with my first girlfriend, my mom said, "She was really nice."

I had a picture of them together, the girlfriend and my mom, standing in front of the plants in my mom's garden. I can't remember why I had a camera just then or why they stood next to each other for the picture.

After a girlfriend cheated on me, my mom said, "I never liked her anyway."

Maybe it was because of the cheating. Maybe my mom said that for me.

After I broke up with another girlfriend, my mom said, "She seemed like she really liked you."

That was the worst one.

Sometimes I think about what my mom will say about you. I try to guess.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sweetmuffincakes,

Nicknames are hard for me. They don't ever sound right.

Sugar. Sugar tastes good. But it's bad for you. It does bad things to your insides. It makes you happy for a minute, but then you miss it and feel miserable when it's gone, and you don't know why.

Honey. Same thing.

Sweetheart. That one's not so bad. Not as a name. The problem is I dogsit all the time for this dog I call Sweetheart. I get her food out and call her Sweetheart because she never wants to eat right away. She wants to sit on my feet first.

Baby. I don't know. You're not a baby. I don't do so good with babies.

Dear. That's what my parents called each other when they would fight. Dear this and Dear that. What they really meant was something mad. I don't think I could ever use that one.

Darling. That one's not so bad. But it's a mouthful. If I'm going to say a mouthful, I'd rather say your name.

Donut. I really like donuts.

Is Donut one we could use? Is Donut okay?

Best,
Pete

Dear Fuzzball,

You didn't have to warn me. To put your hand on my chest. To say, "Just so you know..."
You really thought your leg fuzz against my own legs was worth stopping for?

Best,
Pete

Dear Camera Shy,

You could have trusted me to treat naked pictures of you right.

I wouldn't copy them. And I would hide them at my apartment so nobody would find them. Maybe underneath my dresser. No. That means kneeling on the carpet every time I wanted to see. Maybe inside my old motorcycle boots. The ones on the high shelf in the closet.

If you asked to have your pictures back when we split, I would give them back. I would think about copying them first, but I wouldn't.

I would put your pictures in a nice envelope before I gave them back to you.

There were a lot of ways that I didn't take care of your naked body. I know a lot more about how to be a good guy with naked body pictures than I do with real naked people.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ms. Freeze,

My whole life I've been too warm. It might be because when I was a kid our house was really cold all the time. I heard your veins go deeper beneath your skin to keep you warm. My veins must be down to the bone because I almost never get cold.

A lot of people probably like warm hands on their bodies. But I touched your hands and they were so cold.

And then I thought about your hands on my back when it was summer and I couldn't sleep, and your hands on my hands in the car when we were sitting in traffic and the air was still and dirty and hot, and your hands your hands your hands.

Best,
Pete

Dear Head & Shoulders,

When you come over, I try and not wash my hair until right before you get here. Go the day before without. It makes my hair nice. Softer.

It happened by accident, finding that out. I just went without washing my hair for a while because of camping.

Some things don't need as much cleaning, I guess. Some things are better without, like a cast iron pan. I kept trying to convince this guy I knew that he shouldn't wash his cast iron pan because it takes away the seasoning, but he didn't believe me because I couldn't explain it right.

Some things are better when they're not all the way clean.

It doesn't matter to me if you're not all the way clean. I know that stuff happened before we met. It's okay. It's supposed to be like that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Wounded,

Don't worry. Handing you a tissue wasn't me saying Stop Crying.

Best,
Pete

Dear Family Tie,

Thanks for liking my brother.

I don't know that I could leave you. So it's a good thing you like him.

Best,
Pete

Dear Spooky,

I never told you how much work I put into my Halloween costume. I didn't want you to think I was a dork.

I was a dork. It was a lot of work.

Some people like dressing up because it's like you get to be a different person. Or forget about your problems. It's like moving to a new city where no one knows you, but better because you still know all the good places to eat.

I didn't feel like I really WAS the guy from Legend of Zelda. It was more like I was still me, but the kind of me who dressed up like the guy from Legend of Zelda. Which is a lot better.

Best,
Pete

Dear Popsicle,

Sorry it was so cold when you came over. Keeping the house cold wasn't a trick. To get you to come lay down with me under the blankets.

Although if I knew that would happen, I would have turned down the heat even a little more. I'm not above that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Distanced,

It wasn't that far away. It wasn't the miles so much. It was asking myself, Is it worth it? By the time she gets here or I get there, how much time is left and is it worth it?

What a stupid thing to ask.

Best,
Pete

Dear Penny Wise,

Just so you know, if we ever get serious and decide to move in together, between the hole I accidentally broke in the wall and the epoxy I spilled all over the carpet, there's no way in hell I'm getting back the damage deposit on my apartment.

If we move into a new place, and if we stay together for a while, odds are we won't get that damage deposit back either.

Best,
Pete

Dear Bodily,

We make everything into our own bodies.

A storm has an eye.

If something is good, let's say a good idea, then we say it has legs.

A table has legs too.

Arms. A chair doesn't have side walls. It has arms.

A needle doesn't have a hole. It has an eye.

Something curved can be an elbow.

If a wine smells right, it has a nose.

A chest holds our things.

Feet. Everything has feet.

Like I need all these reminders to think about body parts more.

Best,
Pete

Dear Strapped,

There was this time we hugged. It was outside, cold. We were outside your car. Sometimes it's really hard to tell how long these things are going to last. That time it wasn't. That time it was cold. Your nose was cold on my neck. Your car running in place.

When I held you that night, I had both arms around you, one hand clamped onto your purse strap. It felt solid. Like I could really grip you for a second.

Later it hit me that me holding your purse strap, how tight I squeezed the leather in my hand, you couldn't feel it at all. You didn't even know it was happening. You couldn't know because I was holding your purse strap instead of you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Maid,

Don't make the bed when you stay over, okay? You're so tidy. There's nothing in my place to remind me you were here.

Best,
Pete

Dear Veggie,

With cooking burgers I can make them regular style. With an egg mixed in so they hold solid. Or mix together half pork and half beef and throw them under a metal bowl for steam to make sliders. Or even char them a little bit and then simmer in barbecue sauce.

I've done roasted chicken and pulled pork and all that good stuff.

Last night was the first time I've ever cooked tofu.

Here I am, standing at the sink, looking at this wobbly slab of goo. No idea what I'm doing. No idea. If I saw this glob outside the kitchen, maybe just on the sidewalk or something, the last thing I would guess is that it's for eating.

Right in the middle of a daydream about tofu crawling in the gutter towards the sewer, the slab bending and straightening like an inchworm, the kitchen timer went off to tell me that garlic was done roasting in the oven.

Roasted garlic. That was something I knew about.

Opening the oven door, the smell helped me remember that I knew some of this. There was something for me to grab onto. The skin fell away from the cloves and this was something my thumbs could work with. The roasted smell, the nut smell from home.

I breathed it in one last time. Roasted just right for the tofu. Something I knew with something I didn't. Hoping it would come out a little like the home I remembered and a little bit like something else.

Best,
Pete

Dear Drowning,

My nose couldn't breathe when we kissed long for the first time. Lousy time for a cold. My nose couldn't catch breath. After every kiss I'd pull away for air.

I was drowning on your couch. Wishing for an oxygen mask to get the most out of the times between.

I thought about oxygen masks and that thing where they take out your blood and replace it with someone else's blood. I thought about carting around a dolly and a tank of air and one of those tubes that goes in your nose like an old man has.

It never came to me that we could just stop kissing.

Best,
Pete

Dear Meteorologist,

Whenever it rains, when the first couple drops skim the hair on my arms, I'll always turn to whoever I'm with and say, Do you feel that?

A lot of times the other person will say Yes, it's raining.

They say it like I should know for sure. They say it like I should know for sure and shouldn't have to ask.

I'm not always good at asking for what I need.

When it rains, I need you to say Yes.

It doesn't rain much here, so I need you to say Yes Yes Yes And It's Wonderful.

I need you to know that sometimes I really think my mind is breaking apart and maybe there's no rain. I need you to grab my wrists too tight and tell me to look up. I worry that the first thing that breaks when I'm crazy is I feel little drops all over my hands and my arms and my face that aren't there. That it rains just in my head, but I feel it on my skin anyway.

What I'm asking for, what I need, is for someone to remind me I'm not crazy for feeling like my life will be too short and being scared of a lot of things and for thinking that it might rain today.

Best,
Pete

Dear Covetous,

I've had the same teddy bear since I was a little kid. Maybe since I was born. I don't know exactly when he came along, but there are pictures of me and him sitting on the couch, both of us wearing diapers. I said if I had to wear a diaper, he did too. His bright yellow fur. The small strip of red felt for a tongue that poked out of his mouth. My guy.

My last couple girlfriends, he ended up at their houses. One was because we did a kind of a trade where she brought her guy to my house and I took hers. It was kind of a bad trade for me. Her guy was kind of small and scrawny, and I didn't like him so much.

When we broke up I was surprised she gave me my guy back. I wasn't thinking about him all that much, to be honest.

My guy's nose started getting kind of flat. He had a snout, maybe it's called a muzzle. Something about the way the stuffing moved in his head. He started to have this sort of saggy, anteater nose.

My next girlfriend after that, I let her niece borrow him. That time I thought he was gone for sure. Her niece slept with my guy all the time.

And then a couple years later, there he was in a box with all my clothes I left over there and my books and my shower stuff and a birthday present she never gave me because she planned far enough ahead that she bought me a birthday present before she knew we would break up. There he was. His nose even more smashed. His little red tongue gone.

Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't want you to take my guy away from me. I kind of let everyone else do that, and then I thought he was gone, and then he was back. I don't want to keep doing that over and over. I don't want him to come back. I want my guy to just stay. Stay with me.

Best,
Pete

Dear Summer Lovin',

It's better with me in winter. Promise.

I won't be so sweaty all the time. Under my arms and all down my back.

I won't want to get out of bed right away in the morning. We can stay under the blanket. Under the extra blanket that's in the closet right now, but I promise it's heavy and warm and smells good because it's in a drawer with cedar.

I won't squint out weird faces every time we go outside.

I won't need sunglasses. You'll see my eyes. You'll see my breath.

Just hang in there. Please.

All these things are waiting in the winter.

Best,
Pete

Dear Carrier,

My face in your hands, and your cold hands on my hot cheeks, and a kiss on the mouth when I was sick even though I tried to stop you.

Thank you.

Best,
Pete

Dear Ruthless Opponent,

Me and my brothers had this great laser tag set when I was a kid. We'd run the house over and blast each other. Shoot, reload, hide out in the closet, the good one by the stairs.

Each laser tag set had a gun and chest plate. Your brother could shoot you in the chest plate, and if you got shot enough times your gun stopped dead.

Your brother could shoot you in the gun too. So if you could shoot him dead, he could do it to you too. That made the game fair until we figured how to cheat, how to cover the sensor with an extended fingertip.

When you're looking at me and I'm looking at you, I think about that. I think about how there isn't a way I can look at you and see your face without you looking at me and seeing my face. I want to find a way to cheat, like covering the gun sensor with a fingertip at laser tag.

So far I haven't figured it out. I haven't figured out a way that means I can look at you without uncovering.

Best,
Pete

Dear Kaboom,

Every time there's a moon base in movies, they build it with a button to blow the whole thing up. Or if someone has a really cool car, they put a secret switch in there to explode the whole thing just in case it falls into the wrong hands. Every evil lab, it's like there's an inspector who says they can't build without a big red button that says SELF-DESTRUCT somewhere in easy reach.

They always push the button at the right time in the movies. They don't ever push it and then find out it was a false alarm. They don't push it way too late to matter. They never push it because they feel a little bored and maybe like they want to try something else, maybe look for a gig at a new secret lab across the highway that has better equipment and more exciting lab coats. When they push it, it's always the right time. They always know the right time to blow it all up.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fixit,

The windshield wiper fluid reservoir in my car cracked. I thought it'd be tough to replace because these directions in a book said you have to remove the car's front wheel. Then some of the trim. Then some other stuff just to get at the reservoir hose.

It turned out okay. The directions were wrong. You could just pull it out from the top and slide the new one in. One bolt. That was it.

The directions were wrong because they're for a newer model car. They make cars different now. The way things fit is different.

What they do now is take all the pieces, take those and put models of them in a computer. Then they tell the computer how much space it has to fit all that stuff in. Then the computer crams everything in. It's really something.

The only problem is that everything is about space. So something that you might need to get at, something like a windshield wiper fluid reservoir, might end up jammed behind the front wheel because that's where it fits.

I tried to fit everything in. You and me and my job and your job and my friends and your friends and my family and your family. Your clothes and my clothes. Sleeping next to you enough nights. To fit it all in without thinking about where it would all go. Just treating it all like math problems.

Best,
Pete

Dear Climbing Buddy,

Here's a true story about mountain climbers. Cross my heart.

They're climbing somewhere cold and horrible because mountain climbers are like that. It starts snowing heavy. The two guys have a rope that ties them together, and they can't even see each other on the ends of the rope. The falling snow is that thick.

One guy falls. Down the mountain, down through all the snow, and he falls more and falls and falls into a crevice. The two guys are still tied by the rope, and the one guy who didn't fall sits in this blizzard for hours with his hands tight on the rope. He can't pull the other guy up. He doesn't even know if the other guy is alive.

He holds onto the rope until it's dark. Snow the whole time. The only things he can do:

Stay there until he dies.

Cut the rope.

He cuts the rope.

Other mountain climbers were mad at him because they think he broke some kind of mountain climber rule where you never cut the rope no matter what.

It's hard to know. What the weight on the end of the rope means. If it means anything. It's hard to know when you're in the snow and you're going to die, it's hard to know what you'll do.

You could have held that rope forever. You could have waited for me to figure something out or do something or change somehow so you knew I was alive, so you knew there was a reason to hold on and hold on because I would make it worth it.

You could have held that rope until you froze too.

Best,
Pete

Dear Chucklehead,

You would always say the same thing.

You really giggle yourself out, don't you.

It's true. I did.

You giggled me out a lot too. When you would do that thing where you sang love songs with a lisp. Or when you would flex your arm muscles and make explosion sounds like your muscles were so big. Or when you made up that whole story about what if I called you Fatso in front of your dad.

You giggled me out a lot. And now you don't. And now I don't giggle myself out either.

Best,

Pete

Dear Analyzer,

Whenever we said goodbye on the phone, or good night, or whatever we said right before we got off, I always sat and waited for you to hang up.

Most times it was long enough that I knew you weren't in a hurry to hang up the phone. You waited until we finished talking. Until I finished talking most of the time. About work or my dinner or the time the Mars rover drew a penis with balls on Mars and I never got over it.

Thank you.

Those little parts of seconds before you hung up. The whole world.

Best,
Pete

Dear CAPCOM,

In school we did this math problem.

1.) Figure the angle of launch to make a rocket hit the moon.

They probably didn't say "figure." They probably said "calculate." They never used words I liked in math books.

What the math teacher didn't tell us is you have to be exact, dead nuts on when it comes to space. If your rocket is even a little bit off, one inch for every mile it goes, it'll end up 3.769791666666666666666667 miles from where you want it.

One little mistake in figuring over and over, it ends up with this guy floating out in space all by himself. One little mistake over and over and you lose a person forever.

Best,
Pete

Dear Audience at Home,

The videos on those funny video clip shows? Here's how to tell when they're fake.

If a cat jumps out of nowhere, and the cat just happens to jump out of nowhere and hit someone when he's in the middle of the frame, it probably means they planned it out. Because most times, when you catch something crazy, it doesn't happen in the middle of the frame.

Or if you're watching something that's longer than a few seconds. There's something about people where they feel like they have to tell a story. But when a fat guy collapses the side of an aboveground pool, there's not much story to it.

The real test is to ask, Why was someone filming? That's why a lot of the best videos come out of weddings and Christmas. People run their cameras and don't expect anything weird to happen.

When you see someone just filming herself fooling around on a treadmill, you have to wonder.

Maybe that's kind of what you were talking about when you said I was trying too hard. How I always made sure to vacuum out my car when we were took a drive somewhere. How the nightstands in the bedroom were always cleared off. How everything looked a little staged, a little unnatural. How everything looked prepared to where it was hard to tell what part of me was faking it for the audience at home.

Best,
Peter

Dear Hungry,

Some scientists did an experiment like this:

They had two of the same food. Let's say it's pizza.

One pizza they made look real good. Maybe they brushed olive oil over the crust to get it gold. Last summer my uncle sent me this spice stuff called Pizza Pizazz. You pinch it on pizza and that's what makes the little brown spots in the cheese. The scientists do all this stuff to the one pizza, olive oil and Pizza Pizazz.

Then the other pizza, they leave it alone. No special care or anything. It was the same pizza. Just no pizazz.

What happened is the people who ate the nice pizza, their bodies got more stuff from it. Vitamins and stuff. It was better for them even though it was the same pizza except for looks.

I guess there's something to how stuff looks. Maybe it's more important to look good than I thought.

You might be getting some of the stuff you need from me. But maybe you could get more from someone else. Someone with more pizazz.

Best,
Pete

Dear Laundered,

There's a pair of your underwear here. In my hamper. I don't know what to do about it. They run through the wash over and over. One pair of women's pink and black underwear.

I'll be folding warm, dry clothes and there they are.

There's no place for them here. But washing them over and over isn't working either. Because I see them all the time. Every Saturday night, there they are again.

They're different from my underwear. They're so small and so stretchy. I don't know how to hold them. I think about sex when I hold them.

They're not mine to keep. Not mine to throw out either. They run through the wash with everything else. I'm probably not even washing them right. There's probably a special way to wash stuff like that.

I just did laundry, so I have a whole week. Another whole week to figure something out.

Best,
Pete

Dear Approved,

Why can't you just find a nice girl?

Classic mom line.

It's so much easier when the girl isn't nice. If she curses in front of little kids all the time or you saw her throw trash on the ground. Or she said some things about the way you dress.

The nice girl is still nice even after you don't like her anymore. She stays nice all the way to the end. Even after. And you start asking yourself why you couldn't just find a mean, bitter girl for once.

Best,

Pete

Dear Shopper,

At the store, when we used to go together, I liked looking at things with you. Anything. I liked holding a lamp and thinking how we could have this lamp by the bed so you could read there while you waited for me to come home. I liked looking at the kitchen stuff, maybe a nice bowl, and thinking about filling that bowl with popcorn and running back to the couch because the movie just started.

After you left I got rid of a lot of stuff. Some of it was stuff that I didn't want to look at anymore. Some of it was stuff that just got old or broken or something. The cracked soap dish I dropped in the shower. The lamp we got so you could read in bed and wait for me to come home. The one with the chain that goes click chick.

That time after you left. Pulling the chain, the one that killed the light, the click chick and then you next to me in the dark. How the lamp was the same and I let go of the chain and there was nothing but the dark. Holding my breath. Waiting for you in the dark.

Best,
Pete

Dear Editor,

~~That time w~~ When you said ~~that sometimes~~ I talk too much?
I'm starting to think that maybe you were kind of right.

Best,
Pete

Dear Spacey,

This afternoon you could see Venus up in the sky, right next to the moon. Venus as in planet Venus.

It was just a sky dot to me when I first saw it. A day dot. I didn't know it was a whole planet. Maybe just a star stayed up too late. But then a guy told me while I was sitting on the patio at the coffee shop.

He said the white dot was Venus. Then he said, "It looks funny up there. It just sort of looks like someone let go of a white balloon and it's way up."

He was right. After he said that, all I could see was a floating white balloon.

I wish he didn't say that. It was perfect, what he said. And after it was perfect, I couldn't think of a better thing. It was Venus, and it looked like a balloon that a little girl let go up in the sky while she waited for her parents to finish up at a car dealership.

Best,
Pete

Dear Pugilist,

There are lots of ways to beat runners, but to beat another runner, a real person, there's always a best way.

You might have someone who has better endurance than you, he'll try and tire you out. Or you might have a person who runs on guts. He'll run stupid and bring you with him, but you don't have the guts to keep going stupid fast.

If you want to beat someone, beat him to his knees, you have to take away what he's best at. A gutsy runner, stay right on him. Every time he turns to see how much he's opened up, be right there. He won't even have to turn. He'll hear you breathing right behind him. You can run as stupid as him. Stupider.

It's a hard way to win. Break someone this way. If it's in his head that he can beat anyone with his guts, you have to show him how easy you take his guts away. How easy you leave him with nothing.

Nobody ever showed me how to run with someone and make them better. How to make a gutsy runner smarter. How to make a smart runner stupid. The only things I learned were about lining up next to someone and taking them apart.

Best,
Pete

Dear Rowdy,

Pro wrestling is fake. I know that.

What I didn't know before is how it got fake. It used to be that wrestling was all real, way way back. Later on was when it got fake.

Here's how it used to be a long time ago.

Wrestling was real, and people came to watch it. But then the wrestlers were worried that the wrestling matches were too complicated, no fun to watch anymore. Wrestlers were so good at wrestling that only other wrestlers could watch it and understand the moves and the points and all that stuff.

They started doing two matches. At the first match, the guys really wrestled. They would do all the things they knew how to do, and they didn't worry about if it was boring to someone watching. They just wrestled. Underhook. Cross-Body Ride. Flying Mare.

One guy would win, and then they would wrestle the second match. This time in front of a crowd. The wrestlers, they went more showy. The guy who won the first match always won the crowd match too. Like a prize.

Wrestlers got to see who was better. People got a show.

The one thing, it would feel terrible to lose the first match and then know you had to lose again. The same Rear Naked Choke. The same Cradle. In front of everyone. Same Spiral Ride. Because it's not real until everyone knows about it. You lose something, but it's not real. You have to lose it over and over in front of everyone before it's real.

Best,
Pete

Dear Saver,

I saw a TV show where a guy had so many old newspapers in his house and in his car that when he died they had to call for a whole empty garbage truck to haul it all away.

Sometimes when I clean my apartment it feels good, but if I do too good of a job, if I clean out all the old mustard bottles and syrup bottles out of the fridge, my apartment feels like nobody lives there.

After I die there won't be much to do.

The newspapers, all that junk, at least it means something. Someone has to clean them up after the person dies. It's not a good thing, but there's a thing left, some work to do. So it's not like you died and then it didn't change anyone's day.

Best,
Pete

Dear Breeder,

When my friend had a baby, he told me it felt like a relief. He was afraid about dying. That no one would carry on something about him. And now, he said, he didn't have to worry about it.

I didn't tell him I have two dead grandfathers. I've never visited their graves. I don't even know where the graves are. If I really wanted to find them, I wouldn't even know how.

Best,
Pete

Dear Breakdown,

Every job I've had involved breaking down boxes.

That's not some kind of metaphor for taking down career barriers or bullshit like that. What I mean is, all my jobs had a part about standing next to a dumpster to crush cardboard. In a fast food uniform. In a tie. Doesn't matter.

There are lots of techniques. For a standard box, you can turn the box upside down and push on one side with both thumbs to separate the tape from the side just a little. Then strip the tape from the bottom. For trickier boxes, you can cut the tape and then pull the flaps apart. For really tough customers, my preferred method is set the box upside down on the ground and smash through it with your foot. That'll break apart the flaps on the bottom.

No one but me volunteers for box duty because you're next to a dumpster, in the heat, pulling apart cardboard.

But I love it.

I don't know why I'm telling you this. It seems like an important part of me somehow, but I don't know why. Thought I'd just throw it out there and see if it turned into anything.

I'm not the best at sharing. Not great at talking feelings all the time. You might have to settle for techniques on breaking down boxes now and then.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jason Isbell,

Thanks for all the music.

I heard you're getting married. That's really cool.

A person does something like get married and you worry that maybe everything is going to change. Metallica got haircuts and everyone was pretty sure that they'd lose all their rock power. The Samsons of metal.

Or drugs. People will say that this or that guy isn't the same since he got off drugs. Or that he did his best stuff when he was on drugs, or on drinking, or on throwing things out of hotel room windows.

There's a part of me, and goddamn if I don't know how unfair it is, but there's a part of me that'll be reading a really good, sad book, and then when I flip to the back and see the author photo, and he's in a nice nature spot with a smart sweater and maybe a Golden Retriever, and the words under the photo say how he lives here or there with his wife and their two children, goddamn if it doesn't let me down just a little bit.

I really like your sad songs, Mr. Isbell. And if you're not sad anymore, maybe there won't be more sad songs. That's okay. You wrote more than anyone should have to.

If you come out with something new, something about being happy and how things are now, I'll listen. I'll keep it, and it can be another thing where I can think about how nice it will be when everything is going good again and maybe I'll be able to listen to that more too.

Until then, I'm sure you're tired of hearing it, but "Streetlights" really is some kind of song.

Best,
Pete

Dear Batfan,

Batman is more invincible than Superman.

Superman is always getting in trouble. The bad guys always figure out the way to hurt him is to hurt people he cares about. Next thing you know, Lois Lane gets thrown off a bridge or a skyscraper or a mountaintop. She's always falling falling falling. Jimmy Olsen, Parasite is turning him into some kind of mummy or Brainiac has him tied up in some kind of futuristic torture chair.

Batman figured out that if he doesn't have anyone he cares about, bad guys can't do that. He figured out if you don't have anybody, you're more invincible than Superman.

Best,
Pete

Dear 7-Year Pen,

I saw you in a museum gift shop. I read your label that said you were built with a sturdier tip and an extra ink supply. Everything to make you last for 7 years.

I lose pens all the time. Sometimes they turn up in the couch or under the seats in the car. The vacuum at the gas station wheezes and I pull out a pen and set it aside.

Sometimes I wash pens with my pants. That always ruins the pants. And the pens.

I liked the idea of a 7-year pen, though. I thought, Maybe with this one, I can be a little better and take care of it. Maybe if I do a little extra, make sure to keep you close, be careful about when people want to borrow you, if I don't do all those little crimes of neglect like I do most of the time, it might work out between us. 7 years together. The possibility of 7 years might be worth the risk. That's a really good run.

Best,
Pete

Dear NYC,

Thanks for all the diners where someone can go and sit down and eat alone.

Where I'm from we don't have diners. It's not normal to eat out alone for breakfast.

Lots of couples in New York City ask if you'll take their picture in front of this or that thing. Maybe it doesn't happen if you live there. I was in places people visit. The Brooklyn Bridge and Times Square and all up and down Broadway. People visit those places a lot, and most of them want pictures. It's okay to take pictures in places like that. It makes it so you were really there.

I didn't want to horn in on anyone's vacation in New York City. But if they remembered the nice man who set his coffee cup on the ground between his feet on the sidewalk to really take a good picture, and then a second picture just to be sure, if they remembered me being on the other side of that picture, that would be okay. It would be more like I was really there too. Like I was a real guy at Battery Park and the Ghostbuster house instead of something else, something that just eats breakfast alone in diners all up and down Broadway.

Best,
Pete

Dear Stacker,

In school, our teacher wouldn't let us stack two circles on top of each other to draw the number eight. Instead, she made us do it the way where you start at the top, draw a backwards S curve, and then a line that closes both of the loops.

I hated it. I didn't think we should do it that way. Our teacher said it was faster, but I thought any way could be fast if you practiced it enough.

The thing I learned the most in school is that people are going to try and make you do things their way, and there are times when you should just do what they say. Not because it's right, but because otherwise you'll just have to fight a person forever over something dumb like how to draw a number.

After school was done, I was really happy because I thought I wouldn't have to do that anymore. I thought that I could try whichever way I wanted to do things until I found a way I liked.

When you showed me how I should fold a fitted sheet, I know you were trying to make things better for me. I know that now, anyway. When you rolled my towels instead of folding them. When you switched the air vent on my car so it wouldn't get foggy inside. I know you were making things better when you folded my sweaters instead of hanging them up.

Back then, though, when you showed me, it felt like I was back in school and learning how to write numbers the way someone else liked. It felt like I could fight, or I could let it go and be stuck doing it that way for years and years and years. Write every number the way you wrote the numbers, forever and ever.

Best,
Pete

Dear Relief,

There's this thing that people say about women. I like my women like I like my coffee. And then they say something about women they like.

They'll say, I like my women like I like my coffee: Hot and Black.

They'll say, I like my women like I like my coffee: Sweet and Colombian.

I think they're joking, though. It's just a cute thing to say.

There are some ways a coffee lady might be nice, though.

Coffee makes my headaches go away when I spent the whole night dreaming about work again. It would be nice if a lady helped headaches go away. I don't know how she would do it. I don't know how coffee does either.

I like to get up in the morning to spend time with coffee. When everything outside is still quiet. That part of the morning makes sitting in a meeting where no one's talking to me better. I can remember back to the coffee part of the morning and be okay.

As far as being black or Colombian or strong, I like all of those. What the hell. At least I'd have a coffee joke.

Best,
Pete

Dear Birdie,

It works better if you blame the closet for all your junk. It's the closet that holds onto that stuff. You can say something like, You know how closets are.

Some of my stuff was junk before it even got in the closet. Like the rain suit I never wore backpacking in Washington because the material was plastic and hot and I'd rather just be wet.

Some of the closet stuff wasn't junk before it went in there, like the dried starfish I took from the beach. I thought I would need it. To remind me about the beach.

I had to clean it out yesterday. A lot of junk went out.

Hopefully I didn't overdo it. That's always the worry, right? That you'll throw out something you'll need the next day. That tomorrow you'll need a foam clown nose, or a neighbor will need a floor lamp with no lampshade.

You have to do it, though. You have to throw stuff out.

Everyone talks about nesting. Making a little home how you want it. Doing things to make it nice to live somewhere.

For me, throwing out all that old stuff is like backwards nesting. It's not collecting little strings and buttons and putting together something cozy. It's different. All the tossed Pez dispensers make room for someone else.

I don't know where you are, or who you are, but there's a little more room for you here now. And I can keep going. I can make a lot more room for you before the tough decisions. There are plenty of stolen lobster forks and slidey water pens that could go.

One quick thing. The old concert t-shirts are non-negotiable. Just so you know.

Best,
Pete

Dear Stoolie,

Last week, my mom told me that I was an accident baby.

I laughed and said that you're not supposed to tell that to your son.

She just shrugged and laughed too. Then she said I was an accident she was happy about.

It made me feel good. I mean, if I was made on accident, then it's probably not a big deal if I screw up sometimes.

Best,

Pete

Dear Borrower,

I have a pretty big library at home. It's not exactly a problem, but if I ever decide to move there will be some tough decisions.

Some of the books aren't my fault. Sometimes my work throws books away. Books that are worn out or falling apart or someone ripped them to pieces. Sometimes, though, sometimes it's because nobody else wants them. Nobody is taking them home, so they have to go to make room for something that people will take home.

We get a list called a weeding list. The books nobody takes home, those are the weeds, and we pull those to make room for what we want to keep.

Once in a while I could swear that they make the list of things to get rid of, and it might as well be called Stuff Pete Likes and Will Have Heartbreak from Tossing.

Joyce Carol Oates doesn't fare too well. Or Joan Didion. I could fill an entire shelf with ladies who were headed for the trash pile. Grace Paley and Lydia Davis.

It's okay, evenings just me and my ladies at home. I never needed the most popular girl in school anyway.

Best,
Pete

Dear Fantasizer,

It's alright if you thought about someone else when we had sex. Lots of people do it.

I closed my eyes and thought about you when I was with someone else.

That's probably gross. And mean. Mean to you. Mean to her.

Maybe she was thinking about someone else too.

Maybe she always thinks about someone else.

Maybe you always thought about someone else.

Maybe you sometimes still think about me?

Best,

Pete

Dear Passage,

The only door inside my new apartment is a privacy door. There's only two kinds of doors they put inside houses. Privacy doors and passage doors. Passage doors are normal doors. Privacy doors have a little lock in the knob.

Privacy doors, they're not like outside doors. Not meant to keep someone out. They're just for privacy. The way that putting up the little flag on the mailbox doesn't make the mail go away, it's just a signal. That's how a privacy door works too. You turn the knob, it doesn't go, and that's a signal for Not Right Now.

When you would shower at my place, I always heard the privacy knob, the little click right after you shut the door. You passed through the door, closed it, and then made it into a privacy kind of door.

I got your message. Not right now.

Best,
Pete

Dear Binder,

I started talking to a guy.

It's hard to call him anything but "a guy." Everyone knows what I mean when I say it though.

He told me that writing things down was a good idea. To write it all down and print it out. Because that way you can take it and put it in a drawer or in a box in the attic.

I told him I don't have an attic, but he said you could put it anywhere. That the attic isn't important. What's important is you feel like you can hold it and lift it and put it away and take it out. That it's always still there, but you have control over it.

I printed these letters out and put them in one of those binders with the metal hoops. It was the biggest binder they had at the copy place. A sticker on the side said how many inches wide it was. I tried to peel the sticker off but it came off bad and left a bunch of shreds behind. A grey stain.

It's on the shelf. The binder. You. You're on the shelf. You and a lot of other people.

I'm afraid someone will see it and ask what's inside.

It must be good for some people. Outside instead of inside. Binding.

All these letters, they're still both for me. They're inside the binder, but they're still inside me too. I can't make them go away. I can't make you or anyone else go away.

I stopped talking to the guy. He didn't help. All he did was make another one of you out of paper. Something else to hide whenever I'm afraid someone might come over.

Best,
Pete

Dear Humiliated,

Someone showed me a love letter she got in middle school. It was terrible. Even for a middle school boy, it was pretty bad. Although there were some good moments. An analogy relating the pursuit of love to a fat man chasing after a donut. The lines "You must have thought I was stupid. Then I did something even more stupider."

Couldn't you just die.

It wasn't lost on me. Me laughing at someone's love letters like that. It's really different when you get the whole love letter story, the story from the person who ended up with the letter and, in this case, a stuffed groundhog. It was Groundhog Day when she got the note. I'm telling you, this is a hall of fame in strange love letters.

All of it, it makes the guy sound almost crazy. That the love was happening so much in his head. For him, they had a whole relationship he made up.

If you ever talk to the people my love letters are for...well, it's okay if you don't like me the same anymore.

Best,
Pete

Dear Sis,

There's part of me that will always think of you as a little girl. It's my fault. I'm not creative enough or clever enough to redraw you from what I knew into what you are now. And I wasn't there to see it happen by itself.

I apologize like hell for that.

Sitting across from you in the booth at that Mexican restaurant, listening to you talk, it changed a little something. There was still some of a little girl there. But I didn't remember the courage from before.

Best,
Pete

Dear Hank,

I sold the acoustic guitar that's been sitting in the closet.

Can't say I bought it to play for girls. But selling it is definitely a release. I'm done trying to trick girls into thinking I'm cool with bad versions of old country songs.

Best,
Pete

Dear True Believer,

Don't ask about favorite superheroes. Unless you really want to hear about it. Unless you really want to hear about why and which years made being a fan tough and how we held out but goddamn was it a long couple years.

Spider-Man. Spider-Man is the answer for me, by the way.

You know what's great about Spider-Man? We're all a little like Spider-Man.

He has a Spider Sense. It's almost like he knows when bad things are going to happen before they happen. You know how it's sometimes hard to smash a spider, how it almost seems like he knew you were coming? Spider Sense is like that. It makes it hard for bad guys to punch Spider-Man or shoot him or do anything bad to him.

Regular people all have Spider Sense too. It's not a power like flying or freeze breath where we can't ever understand. It's something we have a little bit of.

It's like this. When you're outside, you'll squint when you look up because your body knows, your eyes know, that it's brighter when you look up. Your eyes squint before they even see it. They tighten up before you move your head.

There's all these little Spider Sense things your body does. Like you can see just a little bit into the future. Like you could jump out of the way of something before you get trapped or hurt.

You know what? This is what I was warning you about. You didn't even ask about superheroes, and here I've been going on about Spider Sense.

Never mind. Sorry about that.

Best,
Pete

Dear Rainbow,

It's really unfair you look so good in aqua.

Just the day before, when you wore red, I said that was a really nice color for you. That's the closest thing you can say to You're Beautiful when you're at work. So I made sure to say it.

And then the next day you wore aqua, and that was even better.

Who looks good in red and aqua?

Who looks good in aqua at all?

You. You, goddamnit. You.

So now with thinking about it, I want to say that aqua is a really good color for you. Red is fine too, but that red day, that wasn't your color. Red was more about you being beautiful.

Best,
Pete

Dear Jiminy,

That time a cricket ran across the floor and you got up to get it, and you put a tissue over the top of it, and then you went to pick it up.

It looked like a magic trick was about to happen. Put a tissue over this ordinary household cricket and then wave your hands, and then you'd whip the tissue off the floor and the cricket would be gone.

I got up to help, and before I got there you said Don't Kill Him.

I lifted the tissue off and trapped the cricket with my hands. It was black, the kind of cricket that's really flat and slow and shiny. I made a box around the cricket with my hands and he crawled around and around my palms. Then I unlocked the front door and tossed the cricket into a bush.

I wasn't going to kill him. Even if you weren't there, even if you didn't tell me not to. I really was going to put him outside.

Best,
Pete

Dear Floppy,

The me from a few days ago still isn't good at touching. That's why he handed you your glove, the one that fell on the ground, holding it by the tip. Dangling the dead squid of the fingers into your hand from way, way up high. Way, way up too high.

There are different people that would do it different. Different people that I am, I mean.

Me from ten years ago, he would have done the dead squid.

Me from five years ago, he would have been better. He knew a little bit. He was learning that how hard it was for him to touch people, how that wasn't normal. He would have pressed it into your hand. Maybe not touching with skin on skin, but you would feel his hand through there.

Me from three years ago, even a little better. He knows that the way it's hard for him to touch people, that hurts them. They don't understand why it's hard for him. He tries to touch people. Just a little more. He would sit the tips of his fingers on her wrist when he gives a glove back.

Me from now. Touch. Still so hard. But learning. Learning how it's different, how something being powerful doesn't make it bad. How to let someone have a little power. To let them touch my skin. My hands, sure. That's easy. Or an arm. But maybe even my face or my neck. Touch my back not just to get my attention or to shake me awake. Just to touch it.

That it's okay, and letting someone touch him isn't going to take all the meaning out of touch.

That guy who handed your glove back, that was me from three years ago. Five years ago. Maybe even more.

It's still better than me from way, way a long time ago. He wouldn't have said anything. He would have walked past. Not because he wanted you to lose a glove. Because it's too scary.

He's not like me from today. Who sees a pretty woman drop a glove, takes a breath and stops her with his words, gives himself a second to get ready to touch her with his one hand.

Best,
Pete

Dear Moose,

These things where I try to say love is like this or that other thing never come out right. I keep trying. Love is like rain boots wasn't right. Love is like a restaurant booth didn't sit well. Love IS a restaurant booth was a disaster.

Right now I'm working love is like when you see a moose in the woods. When you see a moose in the woods, you're always kind of surprised at how much it affects you. You see pictures of moose all the time, and sometimes you see their heads and stuff around, but it's like they aren't even real until you see them and they're real.

Love is like a moose because all you want to do is get closer and get a better look. Then you get older and know more stuff, like how getting close to a moose is a risky plan.

Some people just want to see a moose. Some people want to bring it down. Some people have seen so many that they don't give a damn. Some people never see one their whole lives.

Moose in the woods is the one I'm on right now. I don't know if it's good. You could say love is like any kind of animal and make it work if you think hard enough and you know enough about animals.

Oh, and I get worried that you'll think I'm saying you're like a moose. You're much prettier than a moose. Which isn't a great compliment.

Maybe it's time to move on. The other one I'm working on, I've been thinking how love is like the sugar shaker at a diner.

Best,
Pete